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Let us pray

At a time when more than 100,000 Nepalis are literally gasping for breath, and Kathmandu Valley's air is thick with smoke from burning funeral pyres, the country's political leadership on Thursday was busy counting heads.

Caretaker Prime Minister Oli, whose government was voted out on Monday's special session of Parliament, was trying to cling on in an interim dispensation to oversee early elections. Trying to thwart this was a shaky alliance of Nepali Congress (NC), Maoist Centre and the Janata Samajwadi party (JSP), which was hoping till the last minute that the Madhav Nepal faction of the UML resigns from Parliament to make it easier to muster the numbers to stake their claim.

But even the Nepal faction of the UML is itself divided about whether to resign or not. Mid-level UML members convinced Oli on Thursday to reverse the suspension from the party of Nepal and other leaders.

The NC has reluctantly joined the fray and has been thrust into a kingmaker role, but being an incumbent at a time of an unmanageable national emergency will not favour the party in the next elections. The NC-Maoist-JSP alliance was also iffy because the JSP itself is divided about whether or not to support Oli. Being only the third biggest party, the Maoists are in no position to lead.

Nepalis were already disillusioned with Oli's 'Two-Thirds Government', but his failure to manage the pandemic has raised the level of public disgust

with politics and politicians. Nepalis have tuned off, and do not really care who replaces Oli, or if he stays on.

Most Nepalis are either struggling to find ambulances, hospital beds or oxygen cylinders for family members to bother about who gets to the lead the next government. As the coverage in this edition of *Nepali Times* shows, from Far-West Province to the Tarai, and in Kathmandu itself, citizens have been left to fend for themselves.

If President Bhandari reappoints Oli, he will have to seek another confidence vote in a month, and if he loses that also, there will have to be early elections by the end of the year. Which is what he wanted all along.

Oli will then have to make up for all the mis-steps of the past year to lead a transparent, dynamic and scientific fight against the pandemic even as the country is gripped by election fever.

Whoever is in charge must have a checklist of priorities: vaccines, oxygen, masks, Covid-dedicated hospitals, isolation centres. This is now a humanitarian crisis, and needs a whole new kind of governance structure, one based not on politics as usual, but a united campaign that rises above partisanship to vanquish the virus. Otherwise, we can only pray 🙏

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**We knew the tsunami
was approaching
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Political Super-spreaders

Prime Minister K P Oli called the Special Session of the 271-member Lower House that he himself had dissolved in December, and which was later reinstated by the Supreme Court, to seek the vote on 10 May.

Of the 232 members present, Oli got only 93, and 124 MPs voted against him. Out of 121 of his own UML party's members, 28 from the dissident Madhav Nepal faction decided to keep away, and 15 MPs voted not to vote.

President Bidya Devi Bhandari asked two or more parties in Parliament to demonstrate a majority to form a government within three days. That deadline expired on Thursday at 9pm.

Till press time on Thursday afternoon, a quadrilateral tug-o-war was going on between the UML, NC, Maoist Centre and JSP. Only, it was more complicated than that because each (except the Maoists) also had factions that disagreed about ousting Oli, or joining him.

Why did Oli go into a confidence vote he knew he would lose? He neither lobbied seriously for support, nor did he seem that bothered that he lost. Indications are that he may pull a fast one like his loyalists did in Gandaki and Lumbini Provinces this week to fend off challenges from the Maoist Centre and dissident UMLs.

If defeat was a given, Oli's game plan could be to get President Bhandari to let him have another month to cobble together a coalition. And if he is unsuccessful, he could use a constitutional provision to declare early elections in six months. Even back in December when he dissolved the House, he had called for elections, so it is very much a part of his strategy to use early voting to cut his enemies down to size.

The NC, Maoist Centre, JSP will now be trying to show that they have the requisite numbers. But they will only get that if the Madhav Nepal faction resigns from Parliament, as some of the more radical

anti-Oli members want. Nepal had been persuaded last week by moderate junior leaders of the UML not to resign, for the sake of party unity.

The other hitch is that the JSP is split over joining any coalition against Oli.

Mahanta Thakur and Upendra Yadav have taken diametrically opposing stances, in fact one faction stayed neutral in Monday's vote while the other voted against Oli.

If that happens, Sher Bahadur Deuba looks like the only candidate everyone can agree on to be the next prime minister. It will be his fifth time in the past 25 years—but that does not seem to matter in Nepali politics.

The political deadlock for the past two years has been costly for Nepal. A government that came to power on a slogan of 'prosperity and stability' could deliver neither.

It continues to bungle Covid-19 response so that the country is now faced with an unprecedented national emergency. Politicians of every hue violated protocols by holding large rallies and indoor meetings. The public

was told to be careful, but the leaders did not set a good example.

Parliament on Monday saw the two failures side-by-side—playing high-risk political brinkmanship by holding a high-risk mass gathering. The Special Session was a super-spreader event at a time when Nepal has been reporting more than 9,000 new cases every day for the past week, the number of Covid-19 deaths crossed 4,000 and the total confirmed cases exceeded 400,000.

By the time you are reading these lines on Friday morning we will know who will be leading the government. But it does not seem to matter: what is needed now is a government of national unity to manage this national emergency at a time when so many Nepalis are gasping for breath.



What is needed now is a unity government to manage this national emergency.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Cost of War

Looking back 20 years ago this week, Nepali Times was covering the cost of the conflict on the country's development. That war ended, but now the country is battling a fierce pandemic. What we are seeing is the impact of the lack of investment in health care.

After dramatic progress in nutrition and reducing maternal mortality rate in the early 2000s, things have stagnated as a direct result of political instability (as seen this week when the Prime Minister called for a vote of confidence even at the height of a pandemic).

Oli lost but it was a culmination of his long-term power struggle against erstwhile Nepal Communist Party comrade Pushpa Kamal Dahal, the very Maoist commander who was leading that insurgency to transform the country. Excerpts from the editorial from issue #42 11-17 May 2001:

The Maoist insurgency may be a ruthless and violent grab for power. It may be part of a conspiracy by the far right to secretly co-opt the agenda of the far-left. It may be a plot by ex-panchas to dismantle parliamentary democracy and take us back to the bad old days. There may be foreign hands involved.

One or more of the above may be a fact. But there is one larger truth: the insurgency feeds on decades of indifference, disregard and



utter lack of interest by a succession of governing elites in Kathmandu to the living conditions of its citizens.

At one level, this is a all power game. And there is no guarantee that our current revolutionaries will not rot like all the rulers who precede them. If that happens, the long-suffering people of Nepal will be let down one more time by a group that got to power through a war that was fought in their name. The paralysis of government and a sense of dread about the future has brought investment, development and governance to a grinding halt.

But at another level, it has woken people up somewhat in Kathmandu. Rubbing its eyes, the government thought up this Integrated Security and Development Plan which, though fatally flawed, at least shows a belated recognition of the need to win back the people through development. The threat of Maoist retribution has made village teachers teach, and doctors treat. Foreign aid projects are suddenly mindful about whether "the target groups are beneficiaries" not just in their reports, but in real life. However, improvements derived from threats and fear of punishment will not last. In the long run, public opinion expressed through a system of choosing the most efficient and honest delivery mechanism is the only way.

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

ONLINE PACKAGES



Visit Dhanusha district to see how the Mithila Wildlife Trust has moved beyond just saving the forests to help marginalised local communities during the pandemic with jobs, health and education. Report: *page 5*.



Meet Rita Khatri, who was trained as a skilled birth attendant and returned to her home village in Okhaldhunga district to upgrade the maternity centre at the health post there, and help mothers during the added challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Profile: *page 6-7*.



Watch Anita Bhetwal talk about how she contracted Covid-19 while reporting on the story, and how she has been working from home despite fatigue and loneliness, just to keep her morale up. For a longer version of her Saglo Samaj tv magazine episode, go to DishHome Channel 130, as well as on YouTube. Story: *page 14-15*.

COVID AND POLITICS

I'm losing count of the decades wasted by this appalling single minded focus on intraparty political warfare. ('Nepal is a hotbed of virus and politics', Kunda Dixit, #1060)

Jamie McGuiness

• This health crisis has shown the true face of the political leaders in every country of the world. So sad that people can't rely on the government and yet we vote for them every single election. Shame on them. Shame on us.

Sanjeevani Yonzon

• Yes, the politicians fighting for power and wealth in the midst of mass suffering appears to be a drama to divert the attention of the gullible masses from the acute crisis they are facing. It must end at some point.

Bharat Dutta Koirala

• It is not just Covid-19 and political virus taking toll on Nepali lives and livelihood, there is a third virus lurking: the corruption virus.

Narayan Manandhar

OPEN SPACES

Installing railings on the footpaths is creating enclosed spaces, which could turn into death traps during an emergency ('Kathmandu loses its open spaces', Tom Robertson and Nilima Thapa Shrestha, #1060). We saw on CCTV footage how people rushed out on to the middle of the road when the quake hit.

Kamal Ratna Tuladhar

• I wish every neighbourhood in Kathmandu had children's park, exercise areas and jogging lanes and Tudikhel to look more like Central Park with massive flora and open lawns/gardens, cycling path around the circumference, areas for skateboarding/acrobatic bicycling and horse-drawn carriage rides, with a tiny entry fee. This would generate employment while also serving as places of refuge when required.

Gyanendra Banks

NEPALI STONE OBJECTS

I hope Herr von Schroeder is given an honorary citizenship and "Nepal Ratna" ('Cataloguing Nepal's idols to stop theft', Sonia Awale, #1060). This is a very important work that he has done to us all.

Sameer Rana

GLOBAL WARMING

With global warming, these glaciers will not last long ('Nepal's first hydropower from a glacial lake', Kunda Dixit, #1060). Nepal needs to be thinking about long term and renewable solutions that do not compromise its precious and fragile natural resources.

Candace Kolb

• Among all the other disasters we have to be prepared for are glacial lake outburst floods - GLOF ('DANGER: Nepal's glacial lakes are filling up', #1060).

Manjeet Dhakal

• Nepal needs sustainable development in order to slow the rate of global warming and protect our glaciers from melting.

Sanjeep Shrestha

WHAT'S TRENDING

Cataloguing Nepal's idols to stop theft

by Sonia Awale

Take a break from the pandemic to read how Swiss scholar Ulrich von Schroeder's voluminous documentation of Nepali stone sculptures will render the market of stolen figures and artefacts dead for good. Visit our website for details.

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This is war

Editorial

"There is no comparison between the first and the second wave, the next two months will be difficult." These words from a physician in Bheri Hospital in Nepalganj sums up the new surge that has consumed the country. Follow our social media platform for latest Covid-19 developments.

t Most popular on Twitter

Nepal is a hotbed of virus and politics

by Kunda Dixit

In the midst of a pandemic, Nepal's prime minister calls for a confidence vote in Parliament. And lost it, as we now know. If only leaders had shown the same acumen in confronting the present health-economic emergency, Nepal would be in a much better place today. Go online to read feedback.

💬 Most commented



Nepal's first hydropower from a glacial lake

by Kunda Dixit

Turning global warming into opportunity, a melting Himalayan glacier is harnessed for electricity here in tourism-dependent Langtang valley. Exclusive field report and video on nepalitimes.com.

🔥 Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

- Nepali Times** @NepaliTimes
How can Nepal survive 2nd Covid wave? Masking up, physical separation and mass immunisation, writes Buddha Basnyat.
- Kul Chandra Gautam** @KulCGautam
Yes, @BasnyatBuddha, Nepal needs to implement @UHC2030 & Universal Basic Income concepts because even if we survive this pandemic, there will be another one sooner or later. A big challenge will be dismantling the medical-industrial cartels patronised by our political honchos.

- Nepali Times** @NepaliTimes
Himalayan glaciers are melting and threatening downstream valleys. But in Langtang, a new glacial lake is used to harness electricity for the first time in #Nepal. @kundadixit in #Langtang
- Rita Thapa** @bheribas
A great cherishing news amidst this tragic pandemic!

- Nepali Times** @NepaliTimes
Nepal is a hotbed of virus and politics. In the midst of a pandemic, Nepal's prime minister calls for a confidence vote in Parliament.
- Sujan Dhakal** @SujanDhakal90
It's more about political supremacy than public life for our PM and politicians. We are losing hope in democratic structure!

- Nepali Times** @NepaliTimes
#Nepal registers record high #COVID19 fatalities on Monday at 139. Local governments prepare to extend #lockdown by two more weeks in #Kathmandu.

- Cece** @cecepwat
Shameful that the number of votes in the Parliament gets more attention than the number of covid deaths in our country today.

- Nepali Times** @NepaliTimes
#editorial Why did Oli go into a confidence vote he knew he would lose? Neither did he lobby seriously for support, nor did he seem that bothered that he lost.

- Rupen Pradhan** @rudepen
Making a mockery of #democracy and #CoronavirusNepal

- Asmi Shrestha** @asmehhh
Perfect time for Nepal to descend into political turmoil!

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“EU will stand by Nepal in hard times”

Team Europe will do its part so that 20% of Nepal's population is vaccinated under the COVAX initiative

The 71st birthday of the European Union is a special day. Every year on 9 May we celebrate what started as a peace project in 1950, and is now an alliance for our joint future.



GUEST COLUMN
Nona Deprez

The 27 member states and their 450 million citizens build our Union every day with their actions and their commitment, making it stronger through challenging times such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

From day one, Europe has been guided by the principles of community, solidarity and cooperation. Today, these principles remain as relevant as ever.

Europe promotes a sustainable and balanced growth: at home and in our partner countries. The European Union (EU) is the largest donor of development and humanitarian aid in the world and one of its major economic blocks, building the future based on agreed rules. The EU has expanded its presence in 140 nations across the world to build for all children, wherever they are, whoever they are, a shared world of peace, democracy, prosperity and security.

The EU advocates and promotes a multilateral rules-based world order. It believes that there are global solutions to global problems. And to solve today's global problems, the EU is pushing for universal access to Covid-19 vaccines, to strengthen the global recovery from the pandemic, tackle inequalities, modernise global institutions, establish global rules for the new digital technologies, win the race against climate change and restore our relationship with nature.

The EU is dedicated to tackling the challenge of climate change in Europe and in Nepal, because there is no partial solution to climate change. Some 40% of the world's public climate finance comes from the EU, and climate change is at the heart of our external action and financing.

We want to take this opportunity to invite the government and the people of Nepal to engage in a



UNICEF NEPAL

conversation on how we can work together and make a green alliance with Nepal.

The EU has seized the challenge of climate change in the context of Covid-19 recovery, and has adopted the ambitious European Green Deal, which is the Union's internal growth strategy aiming towards a carbon-neutral Europe by 2050.

As in Europe, the fight against climate change in Nepal is an opportunity to support, alongside with other international partners, Nepal's evolution towards a modern, sustainable, resource-efficient and competitive economy. A green recovery is not only about climate change.

The pandemic has reminded us of the links between environmental degradation and the impacts on human health. Air needs to stay cleaner, and biodiversity loss needs to be reversed. We have to build back better, for the health and wellbeing of our people.

The Covid-19 crisis has put the spotlight on gender bias and its impact on women-owned businesses, on the burden women are facing during the crisis, on their role as essential workers, the increased household load and the increase of gender-based violence.

It is more relevant than ever in this context, to shape the coming socio-economic recovery with women at its centre, so that it is socially just, resilient and inclusive for all and support the progress on Nepal's global commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement.

The EU is showing leadership, responsibility and solidarity with those affected by the pandemic. Since the very start of this pandemic, the EU has chosen multilateralism and cooperation over nationalism and competition. We have formed Team Europe, which consists of the EU, its member states and their diplomatic

networks, and financial institutions such as the national development banks, the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Together, Team Europe has contributed €2.47 billion to the COVAX initiative, which delivered already 40.5 million doses of vaccine to more than 100 countries worldwide, including Nepal – truly embodying our European principles of community, solidarity and cooperation.

COVAX's 348,000 doses of vaccines reached Nepal in March, and Team Europe will do its part so that 20% of Nepal's population is vaccinated for free.

The EU in its over 45 years of partnership with Nepal has contributed to the development, reform and democratisation process of the country, as a reliable companion in the implementation of Nepal's reform strategies. European citizens have given 600

million to Nepal in the last 15 years, and they intend to continue.

We were here during hard times, as when the earthquake hit, and we will continue being here in the next decade. The EU as a political partner will make Nepal's voice stronger in the global and international dialogue and partnerships.

May the friendship between Nepal and the EU and our people grow deeper and stronger. Let us live the principles of community, solidarity and cooperation because we are stronger together.

This year's Europe Day on 9 May, just as last year, happened amidst the pandemic. In keeping with the social distancing measures, online events replaced traditional celebrations. We were not able to share physical spaces, but we were still together virtually, safely from our homes. Stay safe. 🇪🇺

Nona Deprez is Ambassador and Head of EU Delegation to Nepal (@EUinNepal).

prabhu BANK

Upper Tamakosi

With only weeks to go for the opening of the long-awaited 456MW Rs80 billion Upper Tamakosi Hydropower project, the Nepal Electricity Authority is still awaiting clearance to export surplus electricity to India.



After initial tests two units will start generation by mid-May, all six units will be working at full capacity by September.

Nepal is currently importing 500MW from India, and NEA expects this to go down, and once things are sorted out with India exports in the monsoon to begin. India earlier rejected an energy banking proposal that would have allowed Nepal to sell surplus monsoon electricity and import from India in winters. There is a danger that excess Tama Kosi power will be 'spilled' because of the delays in the MCC transmission lines.

Ncell Offer

Ncell has launched a weeklong scheme to mark Eid. Seven customers receiving the most calls from UAE seven will win Samsung Galaxy A20 smartphones each. Winners will be decided based on call frequency, average call duration and call received minutes.



Dolma Impact Fund II

The first close of the \$40 million Dolma Impact Fund II has been announced as a private equity fund investing primarily in renewable energy, healthcare and technology in Nepal. Investors are FMO, the Dutch entrepreneurial development bank, CDC Group, the UK's development finance institution and impact investor, Swedfund, the Swedish development finance institution, and the International Finance Corporation (IFC). The final close is targeted at \$75m.



The announcement coincides with the second wave of Covid-19 impacting Nepal. Dolma II's target sectors will directly address capacity constraints in healthcare and enable digital solutions to scale rapidly that will be vital both during and following the pandemic.

Golchha helps Patan Hospital

Golchha Group has donated Rs10 million to Patan Academy of Health Sciences (PAHS) to ease equipment shortage, manage oxygen supply, add hospital beds and improve service delivery in their efforts to deliver effective treatment against Covid-19.



Children's Hospital

Global IME Bank Limited has announced to provide Rs10 million to Kathmandu Institute of Child Health to build a multifocal children's hospital in Budhanilkantha. "We are also building similar satellite hospitals in other provinces," said Chairman of the Institute Bhagwan Koirala.

Bo2 with Genese

Business Oxygen Private Limited (Bo2) has signed a shareholders' agreement (SHA) with Genese Solutions, a multinational cloud consulting company. With the new investment, Genese will



now expand its hybrid cloud services, Amazon Web Services (AWS) certifications and training to Nepal.

NYEF-Kathmandu Chapter

A new Executive Committee of the Nepalese Young Entrepreneurs' Forum (NYEF) - Kathmandu Chapter was formed on 6 May with Niraj Karmacharya as the president, Samiksha Rai as the immediate past president, Chirag Goyal as the first vice president, Prarthana Saakha as the second vice president and Abhimanyu Golchha, Appa Sherpa, Cheteze Tamang, Deepika Shrestha, Ichhya Malla, Rasana Shrestha and Subin Shrestha as executive members.





ALL PHOTOS: DEV NARAYAN MANDAL

Empowering Nepalis during Covid-19 crisis

Supporting people to protect Tarai forest lifts their socio-economic status during pandemic



● Kaustubh Dhital

What started out as a wildlife conservation initiative in the Tarai has repurposed itself during Nepal's wildfire and pandemic crises, setting an example for other communities on ways to bounce back.

While most development projects in Nepal ground to a halt during the lockdown, the Dhanushadham Protected Forest (DPF) generates employment for the most underserved groups by providing work instead of relief. With catalytic help, it has moved beyond just saving trees to upgrading health services, local schools, and creating jobs.

Just as in last year's lockdown, the DPF is mobilising the local community in Dhanusha during the second wave to pit, irrigate and prepare 32 hectares of the local Bhatighari forest for planting saplings before the monsoon. In the process, families get income at a time when many have lost their jobs during the lockdown.

The District Forest Office provided saplings of 22 native species, and the community offered odd jobs to the Dom, Dalit and Musahar families. As in last year's crisis, nearly 30,000 people are expected to benefit from temporary employment in preparing degraded land for afforestation.

"The marginalised castes generally lack permanent homes and proof of citizenship, so they are deprived of government relief which is based on voter registration lists," explains activist Dev Narayan Mandal (pictured above, left) of the Mithila Wildlife Trust in Dhanusha District who leads the program. "Our reforestation program aims to help them with

income during the crisis."

During the wildfire season in March-April, locals mobilised themselves in emergency fire-fighting, dousing the flames to protect the 360 hectares of the DPF. Mandal's long-term hope after the pandemic is to turn the conservation area into an eco-tourism destination for some of the thousands of pilgrims who throng to Janakpur, and provide sustainable income for the families living on the margins.

Since the forests were restored, many of the migratory species of birds like Siberian white cranes have returned, as have wild elephants, sloth bears, hyenas, wild dogs, blue bulls, tortoises, snakes and spotted leopards.

Mandal has a post-graduate degree in Environment and Sustainable Development and returned to Nepal in 2012 after working for ten years in Delhi, and was shocked to see that the dense hardwood forests along the Chure foothills that he remembered from his childhood were all gone. With it, the wildlife had disappeared, there was water scarcity and other environmental problems.

Mandal set up the Mithila Wildlife Trust and adopted the Dhanushadham forest to prove that protecting nature can also uplift the socio-economic status of communities suffering exclusion due to caste, and empower them with self-sufficiency and dignity.

Mandal used his reputation as Nepal's first snake rescuer to garner attention in the media, raise money through interaction programs for his plans to protect Dhanushadham not just to restore nature but to help communities traditionally neglected by society.

"When I returned from India, the forest was so thin I could see through the trees to the other side," Mandal recalls. "There was

encroachment from north and south, illegal logging, wildlife poaching, overgrazing."

Mandal was able to convince local communities about the long-term benefits of conservation, and they excitedly rallied behind his Mithila Wildlife Trust, helping DPF become free from illegal felling and open grazing. The Trust set up a micro-finance scheme to support families who had till then relied on timber poaching.

"In over seven years we have not even had a single branch cut," says Mandal proudly. "All this was done hundred per cent by the locals, who were not paid anything. While timber smuggling benefitted only 3% of the local population, sustainable development rewards everyone equally. This got the locals on board."

However, the pandemic threw the eco-tourism prospects in doubt, and local communities needed immediate help to cope with job losses. Mandal raised money from the UK-based Gemma and Chris McGough Charitable Foundation and The Pipal Tree non-profit for a Covid Disaster and Food Relief Challenge to restore another 32 hectares of forests starting June and provide income for those affected by the Covid-19 second wave.

The Department of Forestry chipped in with 29,000 saplings, and with help from the Community Forest User Group (CFUG), the results were so encouraging that the McGough Foundation pledged more money to protect another 12 hectares of forest. Locals are paid for scrub clearance, pitting, planting and irrigating saplings. And the same communities that sprang into action when forest fires swept through the Chure in early April, and they saved the recently reforested areas.

The Mithila Wildlife Trust has come a long way, and has moved far beyond protecting wildlife to help with the education of the local Muslim and Dalit communities. The CFUG Chair is now also heading the local school management community to upgrade classrooms to keep in step with remote learning until schools reopen again.

The success of the Dhanushadham Protected Forest cannot just be measured in money, the regenerated area now serves as an important wildlife corridor between the Tarai, the Chure foothills and beyond. Species displaced by human-animal conflict, like wild elephants, can now return to their original habitats.

Mandal says it gives him a sense of fulfilment to see how just the act of saving trees has had such a wide ripple effect on society. He says, "As the communities become more self-reliant and educated, they are more empowered, and the child marriage rate, school dropout rate, alcoholism, domestic violence, have all fallen sharply." 🇳🇵



SEEING FORESTS AND TREES

Visit Dhanusha district to see how the Mithila Wildlife Trust has moved beyond just saving the forests to help marginalised local communities during the pandemic with jobs, health and education.

At the Covid-19 frontlines

● Priti Thapa

Nepal's rural health system, already underfunded, understaffed and overstretched, is struggling with the enormous added burden of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Having barely coped with the first wave last year, hospitals in the remote mountains of Far-Western Province have found that the variants in the second wave are much more lethal, there are many more patients than before, and more of them require hospitalisation.

In Achham district the administration declared a lockdown on 3 May, but by then the virus was already spreading within families and house-to-house. Till the day before the lockdown, people were still arriving by the busloads from India, Kathmandu and other cities. Testing and tracing were lax, and they were mingling in the markets.

On Wednesday, Nepal added 9,305 new confirmed infections, bringing total active cases to 101,634. There were 168 fatalities. Kathmandu reported 3,924 cases in the last 24 hours. There are 1,241 people in ICU across the country, and 285 patients on ventilator support.

In the village of Jaygad of Achham, for example, an annual fair with large crowds was being held even as 13 out of 15 sample antigen tests came out positive. The virus was spreading into the remotest villages.

"We have increased awareness programs and testing, and local governments have become more active in the recent days and taken more ownership of testing and information dissemination," says Janakraj Dhungana at Achham's District Health Office.

But many wonder whether it is too late to be disseminating information through loudspeakers on masking and distancing, when patients and families throng ill-equipped hospitals. Dhungana himself admits that there was not enough testing and



PHOTOS: NYAYA HEALTH NEPAL

isolation because of a shortage of kits.

Like other districts of Far-Western Province, the caseload in Achham is increasing, with 2,306 positive cases and 17 deaths so far. Of this, 634 positive cases and at least six deaths are during this second wave.

The vaccination drive was also suspended after 3,000 medical personnel and community health workers were inoculated. But 15,000 senior citizens in Achham alone still have not got their second doses.

The government has now asked all hospitals to also treat Covid-19 patients.

Bayalpata Hospital in Achham, which is run by the non-profit Nyaya Health Nepal in partnership with the local government, was not a designated Covid-19 hospital during the first wave. This year, it is treating a flood of Covid-19 cases.

"We had set aside an entire wing for

Saving Nepali mothers

Dedicated nurse returns to the village of her birth to run a birthing centre, and save lives during the pandemic

Unlike many of her nursing colleagues who yearn to go abroad or find a job in a city hospital, Rita Khatri returned to her home village in Okhaldhunga after completing her training as a skilled birth attendant (SBA) in Kathmandu.



MADE IN NEPAL
Naresh Newar

It was not easy for the 21-year-old to be taken seriously by her own community in Phediguth village of Champadevi Municipality, she had to earn their trust and respect one safe delivery at a time.

But just as families in surrounding villages came to depend on her for vital prenatal care and safe deliveries, the Covid-19 pandemic hit. Now, on top of all the other health challenges in rural Nepal, there is the additional danger of being infected with this contagious new strain of the coronavirus that has spread across the country.



Rita Khatri in her clinic (left) continues to serve her community despite the risk of Covid infection.

ALL PHOTOS: NARESH NEWAR

Because of its remoteness and lack of connectivity, the pandemic has not affected this scenic district of eastern Nepal as seriously as other parts of the country. Still, there are 90 active Covid-19 cases in the district and a dozen people

on average test positive every day.

Being a trained midwife, Rita Khatri's main worry is that restrictions on travel and fears about the virus will affect maternal and neonatal health services as most villagers are afraid to visit her

birthing centre for check-ups and deliveries.

"I am scared that the pandemic will set back all the work we have done here to reduce home deliveries and to improve maternal and infant survival," Khatri

says. "We had finally managed to convince families to opt for institutional birthing, but that might now change."

Staff at the centre are also worried about their safety, since this second wave is much more deadly than the one in 2020. Last year, Khatri had helped mothers even when most government health posts had shut down in the districts, many staff were afraid to come to work, and if they did were afraid to even touch their patients.

But Khatri kept the birthing centre open, and carried out 32 deliveries in 2020, some of them complicated ones where the mothers' life would have been in danger if they had given birth at home.

"Closing down would have meant risking the lives of many mothers," says Khatri, who has been trying to convince as many families as possible who are under her care that it was safe to visit the birthing centre.

It is much more difficult this year to convince both mothers and staff. Still, Khatri says, "I am also apprehensive about being infected, but I am the only SBA around here, and I want to ensure as many institutional deliveries as possible and save mothers and their babies from risking home births."

Khatri says that for her, nursing is not just a job. It is an occupation through which she wished to serve her community where there is no doctor for miles around. There is a steely determination in her thin voice as she says, "I will keep my doors open no matter how bad the pandemic is, this is what I was trained to do."

The community has a new esteem for Rita Khatri because of the dedication and hard work she

in rural Nepal

Already underfunded and overstretched, hospitals in Far-West Province struggle to cope with new Covid wave



(left to right) Bayalpata Hospital in Achham run by the non-profit Nyaya Health Nepal is treating a flood of Covid-19 cases.

Services provided from outside of OPD due to Covid cases.

coronavirus cases, but there has been such a surge in the past week that we have turned the emergency room into a Covid ward,” says Mandeep Pathak, medical director at Bayalpata Hospital. “We converted five rooms set aside for drug-resistant tuberculosis treatment for Covid patients.”

Bayalpata is currently treating 26 patients with Covid-19, all of them with low oxygen saturation levels, but new cases are being admitted every day. The hospital has also had to reassign eight rooms for Covid-19 patients, including for 14 of its own staff who have tested positive.

In Dadeldhura Hospital a four-hour drive to the west, all 31 beds are full with Covid-19 patients, and although there are only five ICU beds, 13 patients are receiving

intensive care. In the neighbouring district of Doti, it is the same story.

“Even if we have beds, we have no oxygen, it is a vicious cycle,” says Jagdish Bista, Medical Superintendent at Dadeldhura District Hospital. “The most urgent need now is oxygen, and we are also running out of PPEs.” But what worries the doctor more is the 50-70% positivity rate of testing, and what this means for the next two weeks.

For the time being, the nursing staff shortage has been alleviated with new transfers. But Dadeldhura Hospital’s oxygen plant cannot cope with demand, and there are difficulties to get cylinders refilled in Nepalganj and Dhangadi.

Covid-19 has taken precedence over other cases, apart from emergencies and deliveries. Most patients are in the 30-year-old range, and those turned away seek help in Dhangadi’s Seti Hospital, which is also inundated.

Patients who can get to hospital and get admitted in this remote region are the lucky ones. Local municipalities have built isolation centres, but most are empty because there is no oxygen and no medical personnel,

says Devraj Devkota of Panchadeval Binayak municipality.

“Our people prefer to either isolate at home or try to get to a hospital if their condition deteriorates,” he adds. “We have had no help from Kathmandu.”

But Nepal’s cities, including in the capital, are also out of hospital beds and oxygen, so there is little hope for outside help. In fact, a reverse flow is starting: critical Covid-19 patients in Kathmandu are being helicoptered to Jhapa or Kaski where there are still hospital beds with oxygen.

The need in every municipality in the far west is the same: oxygen cylinders, pulse oximeters and testing kits, and additional hospital beds for serious cases.

Says Achham’s District Health Officer Dhungana: “Oxygen is a problem. We depend on Dhangadi and Nepalganj to refill cylinders. They get used up fast, which has made it a logistical challenge.”

There is also a critical shortage of staff. Despite vacancy notices, there were few applicants for specialised medical personnel even pre-pandemic. For example, although the District Hospital in Mangalsen has ventilators, there is no one to run them, and there isn’t enough oxygen.

Patient referrals to city hospitals offering critical care, or just beds with oxygen, are also complicated. They are also overwhelmed, and there are few ambulances with oxygen for the 8-12 hour journey across mountain highways.

Ambulances are expensive, and helicopter airlifts are even more costly. Despite this, desperate families have taken loans to try to save family members in critical conditions by air lifting them to city hospitals—often too late.

Then there are all the other non-Covid trauma patients needing urgent surgery, or maternity cases. With its free treatment, Bayalpata Hospital has served more than 1 million patients from Achham and six surrounding districts of Karnali and Far-West Provinces in the past 12 years.

Separating Covid-19 and other cases is a

challenge for doctors like Mandeep Pathak who do not like to turn patients away. Even though the height of the pandemic this week, the orthopaedic surgeon has performed 15 operations, including on a 13-year-old boy from Kalikot with a fractured leg. In the past month, Bayalpata Hospital has performed 77 deliveries, of which eight were caesarean sections.

“The staff adjust, innovate, accommodate, reallocate, adapt and have kept working right through the pandemic,” Pathak says.

New health protocols have been adapted to minimise disruptions, and Bayalpata is seeking resources to help with the crisis. There is fear that regular services will be increasingly impacted as the pandemic peaks.

The lockdown also means that families may wait till the very last moment to take patients to hospitals, by when it is usually too late. Bayalpata Hospital has therefore modified some of its regular services to remote care via phone calls.

Bayalpata Hospital’s community health program, for example, that provides regular group antenatal care to pregnant women has been severely impacted. While the program was offered throughout the first wave, it has been interrupted during the second wave, and staff have had to resort to phone-based counselling and follow-up unless in case of emergencies.

The fear is that far-flung and traditionally neglected districts like Achham will be the last to get test kits, PPEs, oxygen, hospital beds and eventually vaccines. The progress Nepal has made over decades in rural healthcare is being undone by the pandemic. 🇳🇵

For offers of assistance to hospitals in Far-Western Nepal, contact:

Bayalpata Hospital: srijana.devkota@nyayahealthnepal.org
+977 9851093920

Dadeldhura Hospital: +977 9858753201 (Dr Jagdish Bista)
<https://give2asia.org/covid-19-pandemic-response-nepal/>



The picturesque Phediguth village in Champadevi Rural Municipality of Okhaldhunga district.

displayed last year, and villagers are glad that they have her to go to for safe motherhood.

It has not been easy for Khatri to earn this trust. When she first returned home to Okhaldhunga to join Phediguth Health Post, villagers heard that a new ‘doctor’ had arrived. But when they came to visit, they were visibly disappointed that it was just a girl they knew from the village.

But within a few months, Khatri proved herself through her professionalism and ability to handle the most complicated maternity cases at the birthing centre which was upgraded with help from the non-profit, One Heart Worldwide (OHW).

Not every delivery goes right, there are some which need specialist treatment or caesarean sections, others suffer post-partum haemorrhage and some mothers are already in a critical condition

because they are brought to the centre too late. When the mother or child cannot be saved, Khatri has sometimes been slapped, kicked and verbally abused by angry relatives.

“I could understand their frustration, but I did not let anything demoralise me,” says Khatri. “I was trying to the best of my ability to save their lives.”

Today, everyone respectfully calls Khatri ‘Sister’, and some even call her ‘Doctor’. Many also have apologised for mistreating her in the past, and come bearing gifts to show their gratitude. “I refuse to take them because I am just doing my duty,” Khatri tells us.

Champadevi Health Post has upgraded its maternity room, but there are many others across Nepal that are struggling with proper buildings, equipment and staff. The biggest challenge is the lack of nurses trained as skilled birth attendants.

When Rita Khatri joined the Phediguth Health Post, its birthing centre did not have proper equipment, not even a maternity bed for deliveries. Most deliveries happened late at night without electricity, and mothers were in prolonged labour sometimes lasting 16 hours. Some of Khatri’s patients preferred lying on the floor to give birth because they found the table that served as a maternity bed very uncomfortable.

Without electricity, staff had to stumble in the dark during deliveries, and it was difficult to keep the maternity room warm without heaters. Khatri tried unsuccessfully with the local government to get power supply, but it was One Heart that installed solar-powered lights. Little by little, the facility was improved to be the clean and bright birth centre it is today.

Khatri is modest about her accomplishment: “This is the least I could do for my birthplace, so giving birth is safe.” 🇳🇵

To donate to Phediguth Health Post:
Account name: Phediguth Health Post
Rastriya Banijya Bank, Okhaldhunga
Account number 207000290101



Meet Rita Khatri, who was trained as a skilled birth attendant and returned to her home village in Okhaldhunga district to upgrade the maternity centre at the health post there, and help mothers during the added challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.



NEST DECOR
ORGANIC COTTON

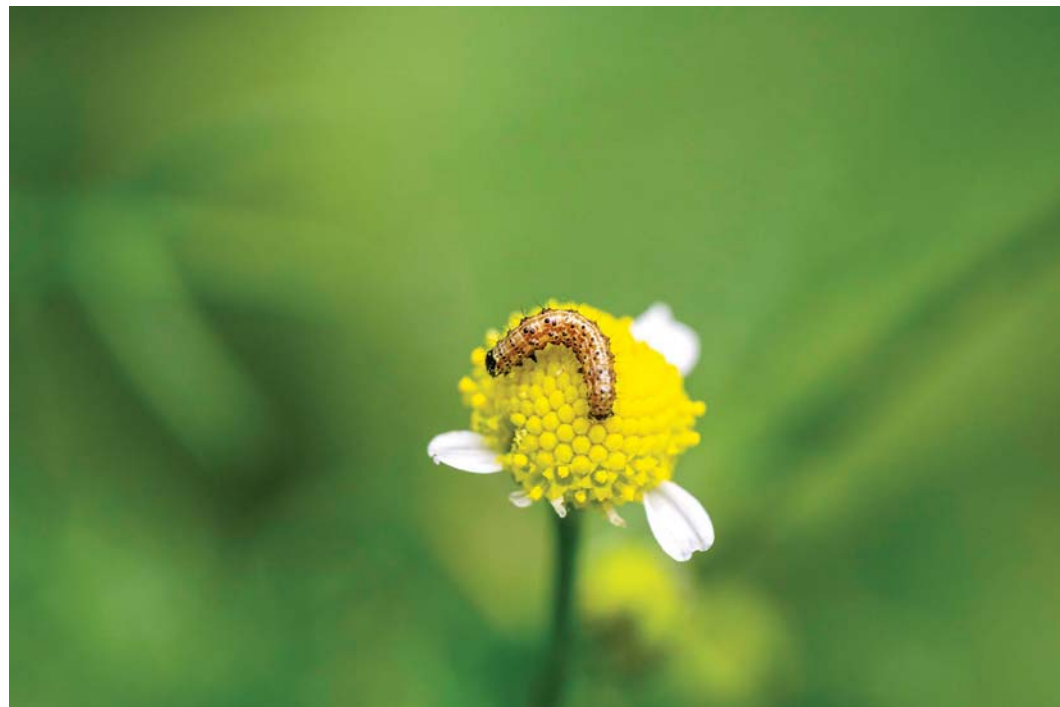


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Nature's fragi gift to Nepal

The Covid-19 pandemic forces us to value the diversity of life and marvel at nature's magnificence



tile



● Ajay Narsingh Rana

From the High Himalaya to the flatlands of Nepal, we in this land have been blessed with nature at its most resplendent. It is when we are prohibited from immersing ourselves in the wilderness like we are now, that we learn to value it even more. We relive the experience of sauntering along single tracks through forests of rhododendron this time of year, and ending up near a gushing waterfall. Or, climbing steeply to a high meadow to be greeted with an expansive mountain vista. Quiet walks inside misty sal forests of the Tarai, the horizon limited by the depth of trees. The heart skips a beat with excitement, scanning the undergrowth, ears strained for an animal's footfall on dry leaves. One does not need to go far. Just on the outskirts of Kathmandu, are terraces dyed yellow with mustard fields in Bungamati, glistening with dew as the morning sun burns away the fog. Nature plays a vital role in the spiritual and physical health of human beings, but cities expand and encroach upon the wilderness shrinking the spaces that the living world once

occupied. Nature retreats, blighted by the pollution of sound, light, air and water. Being in nature changes us, allowing our rejuvenation. It allows us to contemplate the 'being' in human being. We find solace there, and are forced to think about how things should be, how they can be better. We can process creative thoughts and allow new ideas to be born. Above all, nature is much-needed therapy, a balm for our overburdened selves, and a journey of self-discovery. The sounds of nature heal the soul, a respite from the onslaught of the urban cacophony that defiles our urbanised existence. Sitting silently on a fallen log, we listen to birdcalls from the forest canopy as the dappled light is filled with merry song. A light breeze brushes across the tops of trees, making the leaves sigh. Warblers flit from one branch to the other, more heard than seen as they refuse to sit still in their search for food. Birds like the *Rufous Sibia* whistle from a bush, while the crook...cru...croo call comes from a Spotted Dove perching on a nearby tree. Apart from these larger life forms, there is the fascinating small world. Tiny plants and animals that make a large part of what the forest is, and seeing it functioning in cosmic harmony reminds us of the importance of all species great and small in keeping the ecosystem in a state of equilibrium.

The giant moss-covered tree trunk glows in a shaft of sunlight, and on the forest floor tiny wildflowers emerge from underneath blades of grass. Life here is reincarnated continuously from decay and death. Nature nudges us to think of creation as not just a few species, but a collective and collaborative whole, supporting a multitude of life forms. This bonding with the primeval forces us to see our own existence on a timescale that transcends our short lives, it instils empathy and patience in ourselves. This is when we discern how absurd it is for a single species to dominate and control the world. Scientist and conservationist Rachel Carson once said: "In nature, nothing exists alone." Let us celebrate Nepal's natural diversity and cherish this fragile gift we were handed down by the creator, not to keep, but to protect. Nature provides us serenity, hope, and the knowledge to help us along the path called life. 🇳🇵

Ajay Narsingh Rana
is a nature, wildlife
photographer and, a blogger
in prakritinepal.com,
wilderness first responder,
and a rural first aid trainer.



RAJESH LAMA

Nature प्रकृति (n.) All the plants, animals, and things that exist in the universe that are not made by people

Oxford Dictionary



ALL PHOTOS: AJAY NARSINGH RANA



ONLINE EVENTS

Climate change filmmaking
Nepal-based educators and students who are interested in making a film about climate change and the environment can apply to take part in the Camera Sika X Road to COP26: Climate Change Film Competition. Apply at <https://bit.ly/3tBNak9>
Application deadline: 30 June

Film Screening
Join Bertha DocHouse and Short of the Week to view a selection of short documentaries, including films My Brother's Keeper, Darlin, Call Center Blues, and Lost World. Available worldwide to watch, for free. Details to register on One World Media's Facebook page.
14-16 May

Essay Contest
Writers under 25, send in a previously unpublished 700-word or less essay on the theme 'What is Life?' For the 2021 International Essay Contest for Young People, organised by the Goi Peace Foundation based in Japan.
Register at <https://goipeace-essaycontest.org>.



Private yoga sessions
Sooriya Wellness and Yoga centre has made private yoga sessions available to everyone for self-practice at home. Sessions are available on prior appointment. Go to the Sooriya Wellness Facebook page for details.
9818481972

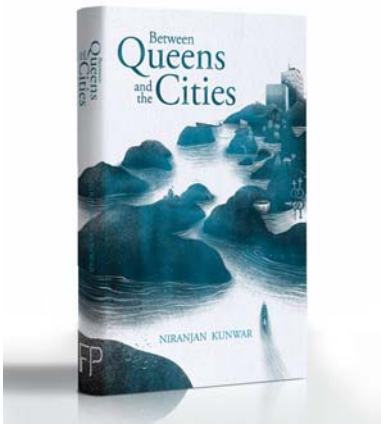
In conversation with...
Keep an eye out for Sattya Media Arts Collective's In conversation with... series. Watch the previous session with Ujala Shrestha, and Dishebh Shrestha on Facebook and check Facebook for updates on the next session.

HOME DINING



Tasty
This is the time to broaden culinary horizons. If there was one app that was made for millennial chefs, it's Tasty. The Tasty website and the mobile app has hundreds of recipes to choose from, and quick 'n easy how-to videos.

ISOLATION READING



Between Queens and the Cities
Nirajan Kunwar's memoir Between Queens and the Cities, published in 2020, is a coming-of-age-story of a gay man in Nepal navigating life while exploring his identity and finding a place to call home.

HIMALAYA A Human History
Ed Douglas' 2021 book, the first major history of the Himalaya, tackles a vast subject, taking readers on a journey that starts with the geological crash of tectonic plates 50 million years ago to present-day disputes about national borders and contentious commercial expeditions.

Little Fires Everywhere
American author Celeste Ng's sophomore novel Little Fires Everywhere that was adapted into a miniseries is a story of two families living in Ohio in the 1990s and explores race, privilege, and motherhood.

Shadow City
Indian journalist and author Taran N. Khan's memoir Shadow City: A Woman Walks Kabul is the author's discovery of Kabul after having been told never to walk in the city when she first arrived in Afghanistan.

Vesper Flights
Vesper Flights, Helen Macdonald's timely collection of essays published in 2020, is about the human relationship to the natural world and explores topics ranging from twentieth-century spies to catching swans and hunting mushrooms.

Cookpad
Cookpad has easy homemade recipes that inspire home chefs to experiment with food and share recipes with others around the world. Relying on user-generated content, Cookpad feels like a social network for culinary enthusiasts.

Binging with Babish
Filmmaker Andrew Rea's Binging with Babish, part of his channel Babish Culinary Universe, is a YouTube cooking series in which he recreates recipes featured in film, television, and video games.

Feast Meets West
In Feast Meets West, hosts Lynda Liu in NYC and Iris Van Kerckhove in Hong Kong trace the origin and journeys of Asian food and food trends to the west. Listen to episode #39 where the hosts interview New York-based Fulpa Jangbu, who owns and operates Momo Delight, a food cart in NYC.

YOUTUBE DOCUMENTARIES

Real Stories
Go to the Real Stories YouTube channel to watch compelling award-winning documentaries from all over the world. Watch films about war, crime, mental health, technology and more.

Herne Katha
The web series shows untold stories of ordinary people in the form of short documentaries. Head on to their YouTube channel to start.

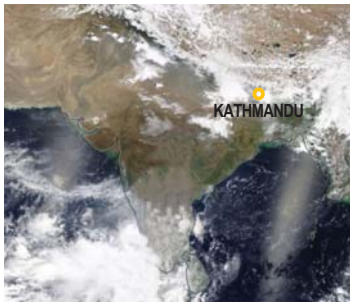


VICE
Watch documentaries about anything and everything from all over the world on the VICE YouTube channel. Start from documentaries about Nepal's honey harvesters, The Nepalese Honey That Makes People Hallucinate, as well as the most recent documentary on human trafficking in Nepal.

Journeyman Pictures
Watch groundbreaking award-winning factual films about some of the most burning issues across the globe including politics, the environment, and the current pandemic. Find Journeyman pictures on YouTube.



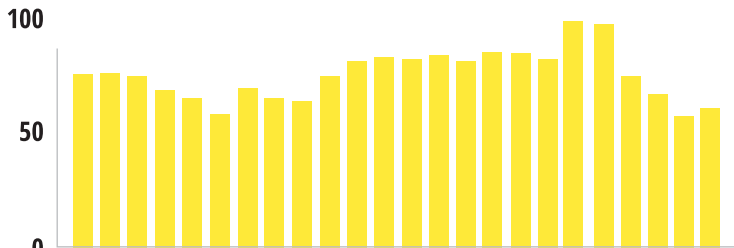
Netflix on YouTube
Netflix has released some of its documentaries for free on YouTube for educational purposes in light of the global coronavirus pandemic. Watch the award-winning documentary Our Planet from Sir David Attenborough to start.



The pre-monsoon showers will get progressively more intense as we head into May. Friday will see storms passing from west to east, and this will keep the maximum temperature in Kathmandu to unusually low levels. There may be a slight letup in the rain over the weekend with the temperature rising to the high 20s, more normal for this time of year. High mountain valleys can be windy with afternoon snow.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
23° 14°	26° 15°	27° 16°

AIR QUALITY INDEX



With the copious pre-monsoon showers, Kathmandu's Air Quality Index (AQI) as measured hourly at the US Embassy grounds at Phora Darbar has improved a lot in the past week. In the past 24 hours it has been in the Yellow 'Moderate' band (below AQI 100) throughout, and on Thursday morning at nearly the Green 'Good' band. Besides the rain flushing out the particles in the air, what has helped is the lockdown and the lack of vehicular emission. Let's all breathe a sigh of relief, but the virus is out and about so keep masks on and avoid going out.

OUR PICK



In Tomm Moore and Ross Stewart's animated fantasy adventure film *Wolfwalkers* that premiered at TIFF 2020, young English apprentice hunter Robyn arrives in Ireland with her father to wipe out the last pack of wolves, seen as demonic creatures in the 17th century. But when Robyn saves and befriends Mebh, a young girl belonging to a mysterious native tribe, their friendship leads her to discover the enchanted world of the *Wolfwalkers*. Stars Honor Kneafsey, Eva Whittaker and Sean Bean.

Kholo 2.0

A CYCLE OF LIFE

We are sorry to notify that the upcoming exhibitions of KHOLO 2.0 will be postponed temporarily due to the health and safety concerns regarding the Coronavirus.

We apologize for any inconvenience but everyone's safety is more important.

FOR MORE INFO
+977 9869579723



Nepal's vultures: Between existence and extinction

The recent mass death of raptors sets back the country's recent gains in saving the endangered species

● Mukesh Pokhrel



The 69 vultures that were found dead in Nawalparasi on 20 April.



Indian and Slender-billed vultures.

ANKIT BISHAL JOSHI

On the grounds of a college campus in Nawalparasi, the great brown birds lay as if they were taking part in some ritual. The vultures were all lying in almost concentric circles around an animal carcass.

The 69 vultures were all dead: 35 White-rumped Vultures, 31 Himalayan Griffons, two Cinereous and one Slender-billed Vulture. Of the four species, two were on the IUCN list of critically endangered birds.

The death of the vultures in Nawalparasi on 20 April is a huge setback to Nepal's successful effort to protect the birds from extinction after they started dying mysteriously in the 1990s.

The White-rumped, Long-billed and Slender-billed Vultures declined by more than 99% in India and Pakistan.

In Nepal, there was a 96% decline in the Slender-billed Vulture population between 1995 and 2001, and the number of White-rumped Vultures had gone down by 91%.

Of the nine species of vultures found in Nepal, four are critically endangered (the Long-billed, White-rumped, Slender-billed and Golden Vultures) according to the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature). The Himalayan Griffon, Hadfor and Cinereous Vultures are also on the near-endangered status.

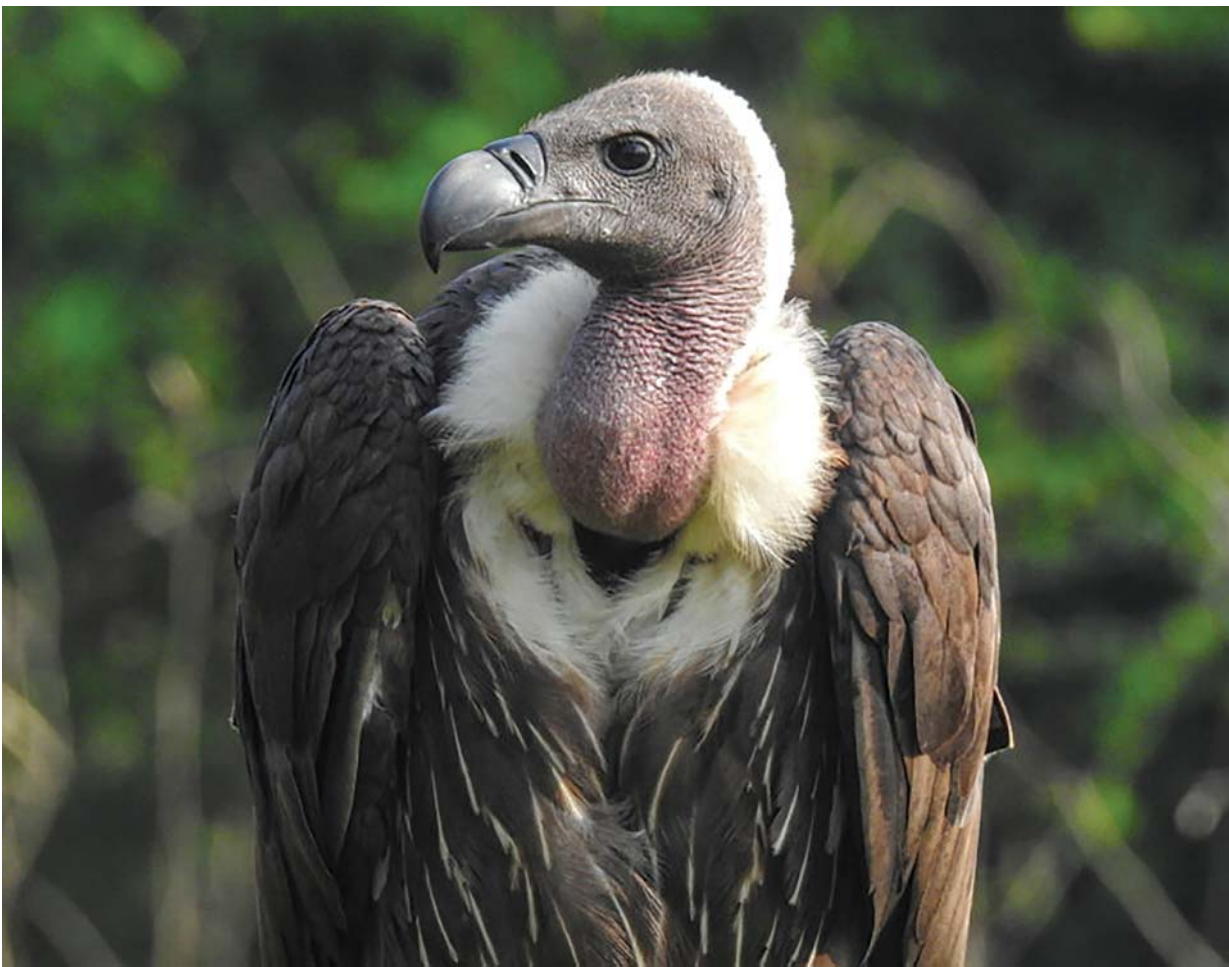
In 2003, scientists discovered that an analgesic called Diclofenac used to treat sick livestock was causing the decline. The residue of the steroid in the carcasses of livestock caused kidney failure in vultures, but not other scavengers. Studies have shown that just 30ml of Diclofenac can kill as many as 800 vultures.

The total number of vultures across Nepal declined from 1.6 million in the 1980s to less than 20,000 today. Moreover, only 50-75 Slender-billed Vultures are remaining in Nepal, and half the remaining 2,000 White-rumped Vultures are expected to disappear in the next ten years.

In 2006, South Asian countries including Nepal banned Diclofenac, and Nawalparasi district saw the opening of several 'vulture restaurants' that serve safe meat for vultures to feed on. Since then, Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN) has set up seven more such feeding centres in Rupandehi, Dang, Kailali, Kaski and Sunsari districts across the Tarai and foothills.

The 'raptor restaurants' are managed locally, aging livestock are reared and upon their natural death the uncontaminated meat is fed to the birds. The effort saw a significant revival of the vulture population in Nepal.

Investigations are continuing into the deaths of the 69 vultures



A White-rumped vulture, only 2,000 of them are left in Nepal.

ANKIT BISHAL JOSHI



White-rumped vultures feeding.

NATIONAL TRUST FOR NATURE CONSERVATION/SAGAR GIRI

last month at Palhi Multiple Campus in Ramgram Municipality of West Nawalparasi. The National Forensic Science Laboratory in Kathmandu is still trying to determine the type of poison used to kill the street dogs on which the vultures fed.

"Once we get the test results back from the laboratory, we will know which pesticide was used to kill the dogs and how strong it was," says Shankar Prasad Gupta, Division Forest Officer of West Nawalparasi. "We will then proceed to stop such use in future."

Nepal's ornithologists and bird conservationists, who had worked so hard to save vultures are still in a state of shock.

"It is a tremendous loss for so many of the endangered vultures to be killed in one place at one time," says Ankit Bilas Joshi of the National Bird Conservation Association. He says that despite the Diclofenac ban, other non-steroidal drugs toxic to vultures and eagles are still being used to treat livestock.

Vultures get a bad rap, and are culturally considered repulsive for feeding on carcasses, which has added to the challenge in their conservation. But this negative perception does a disservice to their contribution to scavenging, in balancing the ecosystem and the food chain.

By consuming carrion, raptors reduce the spread of disease among humans and cattle alike. When vultures nearly became extinct in the Subcontinent animal carcasses lay rotting in the fields and jungles, spreading pathogens.

But the work must go on, and Nepal is developing the world's first vulture sanctuary, stretching over 30,000sq km. Unlike other protected

areas, it will not have a defined perimeter, but it will be free of Diclofenac and other chemicals.

In 2008, the Nepal government also set up a vulture conservation and breeding centre in Kasara in the Chitwan National Park. A 'Vulture Conservation Action Plan 2009-2013' has been approved and implemented followed by a second action plan 2015-2019. Under the campaign, 74 districts (except Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur) have been declared Diclofenac free.

Collectively, these strong local and national conservation efforts had helped to improve food availability and habitat improvement leading to the vulture population either stabilising or rising in numbers. But experts say Nepal alone cannot rescue the birds from extinction.

"Vultures fly long distances

and because of their migratory nature, we need coordinated international conservation effort to protect these endangered species from perishing," says ornithologist Krishna Bhusal, citing the example of a vulture with a geo-locator which last year flew from Nepal across north India to Kashmir.

In the past four years, at least 31 vultures tagged with satellite tracking devices have been released to study their movements. An additional 30 wild vultures fitted with satellite trackers have been found to roam an area of 25,000 sq km in the Tarai and the foothills of the Himalaya.

Vultures mate for life, they nest and rear their chicks together. However, of the nine species found in Nepal, only three build nests on trees, while the Himalayan Griffon, Hadfor and Egyptian Vultures build theirs on cliffs. 🇳🇵

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



AMBASSADOR HOU YANQI/TWITTER

TOUCH DOWN: The first consignment of 400 oxygen cylinders out of the 20,000 promised by China arrives in Kathmandu from Beijing on Tuesday on a Nepal Airlines jet.



NEPAL ARMY/TWITTER

MOUNTAIN CLEANUP: Nepal Army officials have collected a total of 14,936kg of waste from six mountains this season.



NABIN LAMICHANE/RSS

ON HIGH ALERT: Covid patients undergoing treatment in Manang district hospital airlifted on Wednesday for further care in Gandaki hospital in Pokhara.



CHANDRAKALA CHETTRI/RSS

AUTO SHOW: Traffic Police line up confiscated vehicles of drivers travelling without a pass during lockdown in Putali Sadak on Wednesday.



AMIT MACHAMASI

RED GOD: In an event attended by limited devotees, the idol of rain god Rato Machindranath is placed on its chariot on Wednesday, ahead of the month-long annual festival.

Dear Sarkar: Why can't we shop online and stay safe?

Last year, panic shopping during the pandemic became an Internet meme with everyone stocking up extra on toilet paper, toothpaste and tuna cans.

This year, with the highly infectious second wave of the Coronavirus and a third lockdown,



TECH AWAY
Saniaa Shah

things are much worse. Every trip out to buy vegetables is a possible risk of exposure, that you could carry home to your family members.

By this logic, buying more at once makes sense, to reduce the frequency of trips to the market and the chances of bumping into strangers at small local shops. However, a more failsafe, future-focused way of shopping would be online, without dealing with the worries of lack of social distancing, exchanging currency notes and a lot of touching goods and surfaces.

hybrid user behaviour where some people (usually busy, working millennials) prefer saving time and shopping online, while others enjoy spending time physically visiting stores to browse at a leisurely pace and personally pick out items for assurance before making a buying decision.

If the government made accommodations for e-commerce to work smoothly during the lockdown, business would not have to take a sharp toll like now, and it looks like the restrictions will be extended until the latest surge is under control -- going by the severity of the situation in hospitals.

Earlier last year, WHO confirmed that it is safe to receive packages from locations with reported Covid-19 cases. A quote from its website (October 2020): 'The likelihood of an infected person contaminating commercial goods is low and the risk of catching the virus that causes Covid-19 from a package that has been moved, travelled, and exposed to different conditions and temperature is also low.'



The government has extended grocery runs from 6 to 10AM every morning in Kathmandu Valley, with police patrolling the streets to make sure that people are not hanging around, while also looking out for shopkeepers flouting rules by keeping their shutters open beyond the time window.

The government has also allowed online shopping sites to deliver 'essentials only'. These stores are allowed to sell food items, cleaning supplies, toiletries and Covid-related products such as masks, sanitisers, handwash, disinfectants, face shields, oxygen cans and even steam machines.

The same online sites would otherwise have also delivered products of other categories, now deemed 'non-essential': such as books, clothes and footwear, gadgets and electronic appliances, accessories, home decor and furniture, toys, baby products, sports gear, alcoholic beverages as well as unique, innovative items that make life easier.

There is no obvious reason why products of these categories must not be delivered during the lockdown. With a few rules regarding delivery timings (mornings and evenings only), PPE gear for delivery staff and proper sanitisation of vans, and perhaps even a special permit that e-businesses could procure to prove official permission to deliver as well as their legitimacy, all shops could home-deliver any and all goods safely. This would be beneficial for the customers as well as traders, and the e-commerce economy.

Besides, a lot of physical stores would find the incentive to launch online and explore home delivery, something that stores abroad have been doing since March 2020 to survive the pandemic. The garment industry, bookstores, and nursery shops, for example, have all seen the future of shopping: a

citizens, can decrease risk of contracting or spreading the virus by a) staying home and refraining from visiting shops outside b) setting up our mobile banking, e-banking and app wallets for online payments and c) shopping online or through Whatsapp/Viber using the efficient e-commerce grocery options we have at our fingertips.

These include e-commerce bigwigs Daraz and Sastodeal, that have websites as well as apps, food delivery startups like Bhoj (download app to order from various food marts and vendors, such as KK Mart and SabjiLand), online supermarket options like Mero Kirana (only taking app orders due to large demand) and Mero Groceries (functioning smartly by taking Whatsapp and Viber orders), and a variety of online food startups like Kheti Food, Kheti Bazaar and Maato.

Kheti Food, developed by tech company DV Excellus, is quickly becoming a crowd favourite for the quality of vegetables, both organic and regular, as well as the focus on directly benefitting farmers of Nepal.

Its most innovative offering is the fruit and vegetable subscription box that customers can order repeatedly at regular intervals to routinely and conveniently stock up the pantry without scrolling through individual items.

Kheti Foods has a great website, app and email newsletter,

and it has seen immense success between 2020 and 2021 across age groups and demographics. Kheti Bazaar, founded by Subechhya Basnet, specialises in high quality, organic vegetables, rice, lentils, oils, dairy products, spices and exotic healthy grains and seeds.

It is an older startup that relies heavily on its strong but small loyal customer base. It has its own family farm outside the Valley and sells physically from a store set up at Bhojan Griha, Dilli Bazar.

Mato, a Golyan Group agro product, is committed to serving local organic produce, packaged and distributed professionally by a business group that is experienced in scaling up and building a brand by listening to the audience's needs. During the first lockdown, Mato took the revolutionary move of selling vegetables via a mobile van that travelled across neighbourhoods and parked at a spot for 15 minutes to cater to the residents of the area.

Not only was it a clever business strategy but also worked as a marketing move. Since then, Mato has opened a physical store, and continues to do great business through Facebook and Instagram. Looking forward to seeing what happens if it launches a website or mobile app next. 🇳🇵

Saniaa Shah writes this fortnightly column, Tech Away for Nepali Times, and runs Studio Aakar, a film production studio.





China's new batch of medical supplies for Nepal published in Global Times.

Concern in China over Nepal Covid-19 surge

Chinese social media users urge their government to help Nepal fight the pandemic

● **Aneka Rebecca Rajbhandari** and **Raunab Singh Khatri** in Beijing

The Covid-19 second wave ravaging Nepal has raised concern in China's social media platform Weibo, and prompted some to post appeals for the government to help the neighbouring country in its time of need.

The coronavirus surge sweeping India and Nepal has been creating a significant buzz on China's social media platforms, with comments expressing compassion as well as nationalistic outbursts at the situation in India.

Recent news that China was sending a new consignment of medical equipment to Nepal, as well as posts about mismanagement of the Covid-19 surge in India has sparked discussion among the Chinese netizens.

The news of the steep rise in cases in Nepal started being reported in the western media mostly after Covid-19 cases were detected at Mt Everest Base Camp. It was only in the past week that the alarming news from Nepal started gaining traction here.

The posts appear to reflect residual nationalism from the India-China border conflagration last year, and geopolitical tension between the two Asian giants — which could not be more different in the way they

have tackled the pandemic.

One of the most prominent hashtags, #尼泊尔疫情为何迅速恶化 (translation: 'Why the pandemic is rapidly worsening in Nepal') gained 55 million engagements in 24 hours this week. Even though the hashtag concerns Nepal, most of the posts and replies using it centred around India's failure to contain the second wave.

Some deliberately derogatory posts that seemed to rejoice in India's tragedy were taken down after outrage on social media. One post tagging 'China Lighting a Fire' showing China's rocket launch last week side-by-side with 'India Lighting a Fire' showing a mass-cremation site in Delhi drew so much backlash from Weibo users inside and outside China that it was deleted.

The post was traced to the official Weibo account of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission, which is under the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party.

The topic then shifted focus as Chinese netizens worried that Nepal's Covid-19 spread and response will become similar as that in India.

Indeed, the hashtag #尼泊尔是否变成下一个印度 (translation: "Will Nepal become the next India") got over 80 million engagements and counting this week. On 8 May, *Toutiao News*, a major information portal followed the popularity of the hashtag and ran a rather unusual week-long poll asking Chinese netizens' opinion on whether 'Nepal will become the next India'.

More than 85% agreed with this possibility, and some even feared that the spread of the pandemic in Nepal could be worse than in India. While most posts have lumped Nepal and India together on the Covid-19 theme, others have drawn attention to the Nepal-China friendship and urged the Chinese government to help Nepal with emergency supplies.

'Isn't Nepal a good friend of China? All efforts should be made to help them,' said one post, while some others asked that immediate support be rushed to China's 'good neighbour'.

Just as the western media's concern about Nepal's pandemic is largely limited to Mt Everest, the Chinese social media focus is India-centred.

Global Times, China's state-affiliated media, even ran a story highlighting how Chinese enterprises in Nepal were trying to prevent Nepal from becoming a 'mini India'.

China has offered assistance to India to respond to the pandemic, and after a statement of concern by Foreign Minister Wang Yi with an expression of support, many Chinese social media users have urged similar help for Nepal.

Indeed, Beijing seems to be responding. On Tuesday, a Nepal Airlines plane flew to Beijing for the first consignment of 400 oxygen cylinders out of the 20,000 and other medical essentials promised by

China, as Nepal's hospitals struggle to cope with the seriously ill. A similar flight last month brought back 800,000 doses of the Chinese VeroCell vaccine donated by China.

Nepal government has announced that it will resume vaccinating people in Kathmandu Valley with the Chinese Sinopharm VeroCell vaccine from 15 May. The vaccine received WHO approval last week. Some 300,000 Nepalis have already got their first jabs of the vaccine.

Nepal's vaccination program had ground to a halt after an early

promising start after India stopped further export of the Covishield AstraZeneca vaccine manufactured by the Serum Institute even though Nepal had already paid for 2 million doses.

Social media posts here quote the Chinese saying 'A close friend is better than a distant relative', but others have also urged Nepal to improve its governance and delivery instead of just depending on the outside world for help.

One Chinese social media post notes: "The spread of Covid-19

will make China a 'thin horse' so it should not just give assistance for free." The growing debate on China's foreign assistance, both at policy-making level and on social media, hints that countries like Nepal should focus more on early preparedness and control as most other countries grapple with their own Covid-19 crisis.

Aneka Rebecca Rajbhandari studies political science at Peking University. Raunab Singh Khatri is a graduate student in economics at Yenching Academy of Peking University.



Toutiao News report on Nepal's surging COVID-19 cases using hashtag #尼泊尔正在变成一个迷你印度 (Nepal is becoming a mini India)



A Weibo post tagging 'China Lighting a Fire' showing China's rocket launch last week side-by-side with 'India Lighting a Fire' showing a mass-cremation site in Delhi was deleted after backlash from users.

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We knew the tsunami was

A political power struggle delayed government response, and we were complacent

● Anita Bhetwal

A month ago, Nepal was reporting an average of only 300 Covid-19 cases daily, and the number of deaths was zero for several days in a row. The people, and the government, thought the worst was over and in case a vaccine was arriving.

This week, the total number of active cases exceeded 100,000 with daily infections staying above 9,000 for a week. Daily fatalities are now above 150 every day. The nationwide test positivity rate is as high as 50%.

For a country of 30 million, Nepal's figures are higher than that of India and the rest of the world. As such experts have warned of a health catastrophe as bad if not worse than of the southern neighbour. And our curve has not even started to flatten yet, we are nowhere near the peak.

Nepalgunj and Kathmandu have already turned into 'mini India' with the coronavirus spreading like a wildfire, and infected doctors and nurses having to treat patients with the same disease. Nepal's health care system has already exceeded the breaking point.

"It has become a challenge to treat all patients. People are taking longer to recover, plasma therapy and remdesivir aren't effective and 90% of those admitted need oxygen," says Sagar Kumar Rajbhandari, director of Teku Hospital in Kathmandu. "Unlike during the first wave when we could maintain a patient with 1-2 litres of oxygen per day, we now need more than 15 litres per individual."

Doctors are having to select which patients has a better chance of survival on scarce ventilators. Patients are dying in the corridors because they cannot breathe.

Hospitals across the country are now stopping admits because of serious shortages of beds with oxygen, and patients are sleeping on parking lots and verandahs. They are now reporting shortages of masks, PPE and essential medicines as well.

The Covid-19 Crisis Management Centre's latest decision to limit oxygen supply per hospital at 100 litres a day has added to the challenge. Patients



AMIT MACHAMASI

under treatment in hospitals including Bhaktapur and Grande face critical oxygen shortages and can't take on any more people. The quota system has made the situation even more dire.

The first consignment of 400 oxygen cylinders out of the 20,000 promised by China was flown in from Beijing on Tuesday by a Nepal Airlines jet, which also brought ventilators, oxygen concentrators and other equipment.

As of 12 May, 71 out of 77 districts in Nepal are under prohibitory orders. The lockdown in Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur has been extended by another two weeks with further restrictions.

International and domestic flights have been grounded until 31 May except for two Kathmandu-Delhi flights a week under the

Nepal-India air bubble agreement. Only some cargo charters and rescue flights are permitted.

During a virtual meeting on Tuesday health minister Hridayesh Tripathi hinted that the government might have to declare a "health emergency" since the steps it had taken so far were not adequate in addressing the extent of the crisis.

But long before prime minister K P Oli lost a confidence vote in the parliament and plunged the country into further uncertainty, the government's response to the pandemic was dismal at best.

Leaders were busy organising political rallies with thousands in attendance in a show of force after Oli dissolved the parliament in December. Then there were religious gatherings, lavish inaugurations and indoor political meetings.

Similarly, Holi and Biska celebrations went ahead because of protests against government efforts to restrict it. Bars, malls, cinema halls, concerts all continued as if there was no pandemic. Border checkpoints in the Tarai were understaffed.

"If we talk in numbers I'd say 70% of the blame for the new surge goes to the public and 30% to the government," says Sameer Mani Dixit of the Centre for Molecular Dynamic Nepal. "The government could have done more to procure vaccines through diplomacy, enforce safety measures and expand contact tracing. But it was the people who were crowding public spaces without masks or physical distancing, we wouldn't have required lockdowns otherwise."

The Covid-19 crisis has magnified and brought into

sharp focus the result of a lack of investment in Nepal's health system. Medical care is either too sloppy in government hospitals, or too expensive in private ones. Either way, for most Nepalis health care is either inaccessible or unaffordable.

To be sure, the scale of this crisis would have overwhelmed even an industrialised country's health system. But despite knowing that a tsunami of coronavirus was approaching from India, Nepal's health infrastructure remained severely lacking, and hospitals were sorely unprepared, understaffed and under-equipped. The limited resource now has to be distributed also among patients with other diseases.

There are a total of 18,917 general, 1,446 ICU and 634 ventilator beds across the country.



I'm down, but not out

In early April, the coronavirus cases were at an all-time low and we were reporting from Janakpur, and the surrounding border region for two episodes of Himalmedia's *Saglo Samaj* weekly tv magazine program.

But we did not know that the surge in India was already beginning to affect the Tarai. After we returned to Kathmandu, we found out that our fixer in Janakpur had tested positive for Covid-19. All of us at Saglo Samaj on that trip quarantined for a week.

None of us showed any symptoms, so we got back to work, this time to report on the second wave that had by then started to affect Kathmandu Valley. The number of cases was doubling every three days, and the number of fatalities nationwide was shooting up.

A day before the lockdown was to go into effect on 29 April in Kathmandu Valley, we made a round of hospitals to film long queues of people who had either come in for a PCR test or the VeroCell vaccine.



From the way they were crowding, it looked like they had forgotten about physical distancing.

Next, we went to the capital's main bus park (pictured). It was filled with people thronging the ticket booths to get home before public transport stopped. Alas, it looked as if half of them would be taking

the virus with them to the remotest corners of Nepal.

Several people in the ticket queues had no masks, or if they did were wearing them around their chins. Some had their masks dangling from one ear lobe, as if it was an amulet to protect them from the disease. This reminded me of my time in

Janakpur where people were also not the least bit concerned about following safety measures.

I had followed all safety measures, wearing masks and even a face visors when we were in crowded areas. I never left my room without my sanitiser. So I was a bit surprised when I started feeling fatigue and got a slight fever. I tested positive.

On the fifth day, my body started swelling up, I lost all sense of smell or taste. I had an unfamiliar cough, and it kept me from sleeping. My chest hurt like someone was pinching me.

I measured my blood oxygen level obsessively. I looked at the potted jade and money plant in my room and it was reassuring that they were supplying me with additional oxygen. Alone in my room, I tried to keep my spirit up.

My editor told me to rest, and told me I could finish my report after I got better. One part of me wanted to just rest, but another goaded me to work since there was no risk. After all, I thought, I am down, not out.

I am feeling better now, and writing my report helps me forget about Covid-19 and let my antibodies get on with the job of defeating the virus. Work has also helped keep my morale high, since I am communicating about the risk and impact of the pandemic.

I hope to meet you all soon in another episode of *Saglo Samaj*.
Anita Bhetwal



POSITIVE REPORTING

Watch Anita Bhetwal talk about how she contracted Covid-19 while reporting on the story, and how she has been working from home despite fatigue and loneliness, just to keep her morale up. For a longer version of her *Saglo Samaj* tv magazine episode, go to DishHome Channel 130, as well as on YouTube.

s approaching



AMIT MACHAMASI



But that is much less than what is needed. Doctors and nurses are working in longer shifts with diapers because they cannot waste time going to the rest room.

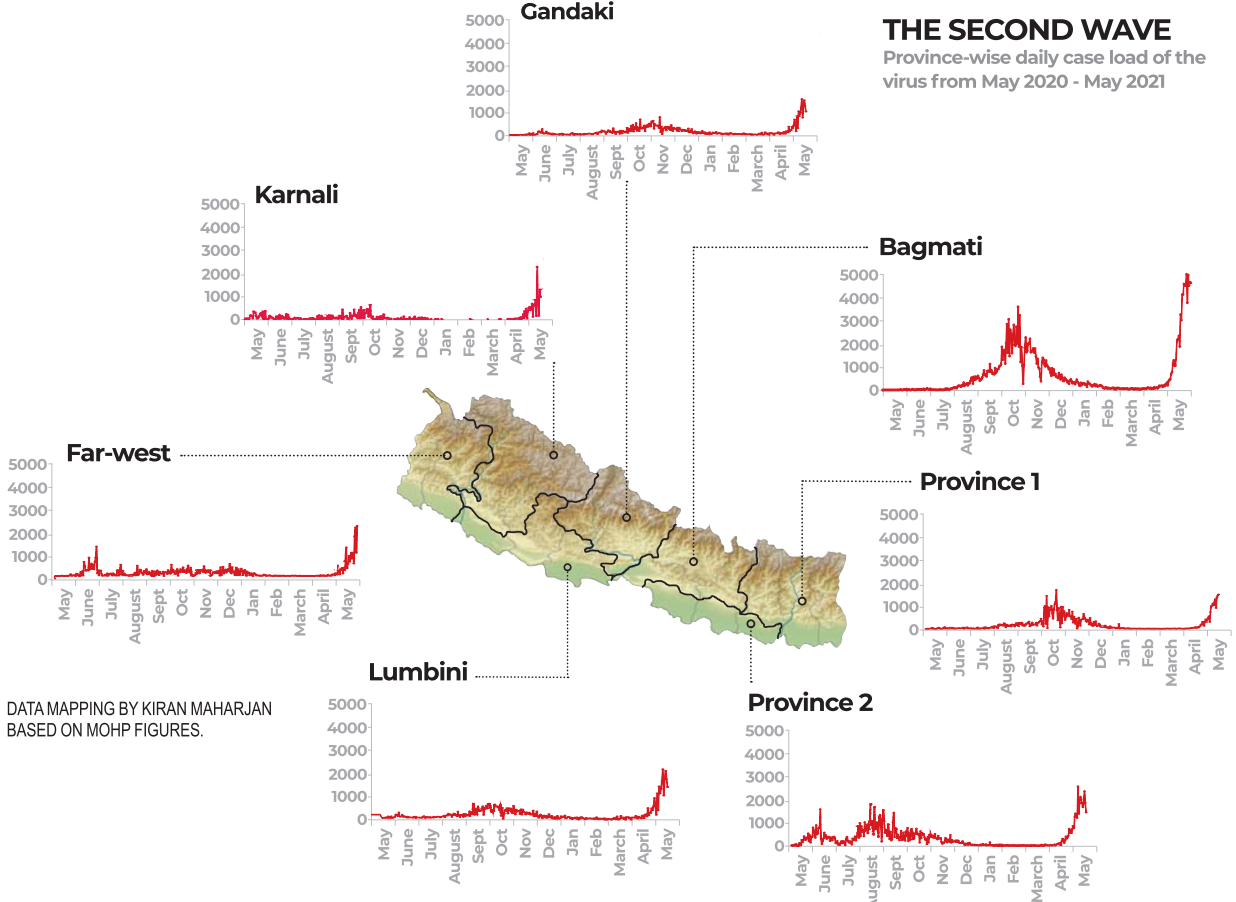
“Having already lived through the first wave albeit the milder one, we knew there was

a risk and should have invested in preparedness but both the government and people didn't realise the severity until it was too late,” says infectious disease specialist Sher Bahadur Pun.

He adds: “We have no visible increase in human resource or infrastructure to show as the stronger surge grips us all. We haven't even begun to think about how to manage children with multisystem inflammatory syndrome requiring ICU due to Covid.”

The Health Ministry has projected the second wave to peak in Nepal with at least 15,000 cases a day by July. Even if that were true, nothing is stopping Nepal from falling victim to the 3rd, 4th and more waves as has happened in Europe and the Americas with new mutants.

The only way out of this pandemic is herd immunity



DATA MAPPING BY KIRAN MAHARJAN
BASED ON MOHP FIGURES.

through mass vaccination. But only 2.1 million of Nepal's 30 million populations have received the first dose of either Covishield or VeroCell vaccines. Fewer than 400,000 have been fully inoculated with the booster shot.

Nepal's plan to buy five million doses of Covidshield fell through after the Indian ban on exports of vaccines. Nepal is yet to receive one million doses it paid for.

The COVAX initiative hasn't been able to deliver owing to a manufacturing bottleneck after the first consignment of its 348,000 doses was delivered in March.

The UN resident coordinator in Nepal Sara Beysolow Nyanti tweeted on Tuesday that Nepal ranked ninth among the 10 top

countries in terms of daily increase in Covid-19 cases, but it has the smallest population and the highest case positivity rate.

She appealed for immediate assistance (pictured), writing: “Nepal has not been able to secure vaccines for even 20% of those who need to be vaccinated. Nepal should be prioritised at the top. I appeal to the countries that can spare vaccine to send them to Nepal immediately.”

Meanwhile, the government has announced that it will resume inoculating people in Kathmandu Valley with the Chinese Sinopharm VeroCell shots from 15 May. The vaccine received WHO approval last week, and the vaccinations will be from the 800,000 doses donated

by China last month. Some 300,000 people have already got their first jabs of the vaccine.

Nepal should now concentrate all its efforts towards vaccine diplomacy to secure more doses for 20% of its population, say public health experts, wherever it may come from and there is no time to waste.

The health ministry maintains that it has approached countries other than India to procure vaccines and funding is not the problem but the supply.

Said health minister Hridayesh Tripathi during Tuesday's press meet: “The government can buy 10 million doses of Covid vaccine if someone can provide it at \$4 per shot.”

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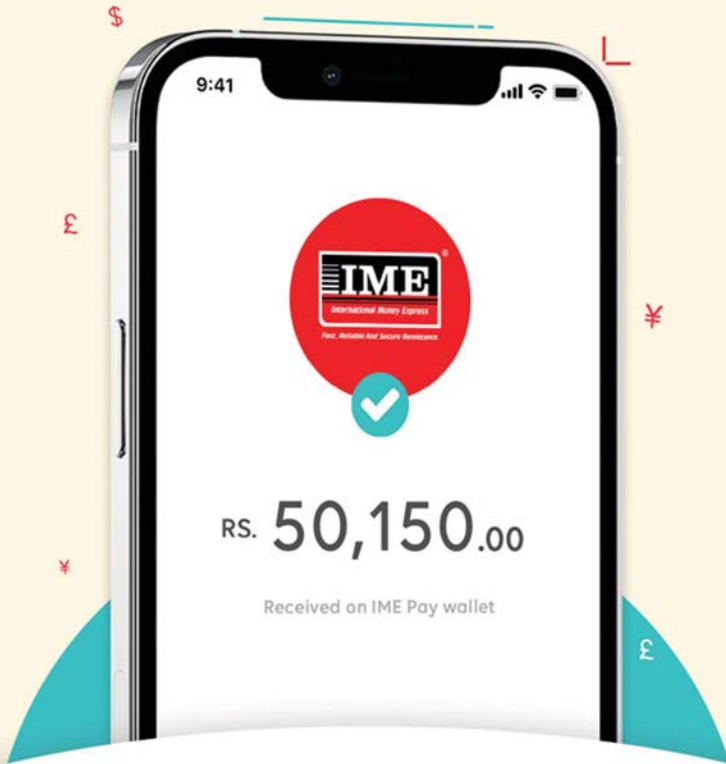
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Ass as Prime Minister

If only Eh-malay alpha males didn't have the if-I-don't-win-I-won't-play mentality, we would by now have a Tarai Fast Track, piped gas in every home and ocean-going container ships docking in Sunsari.

If only Lotus Flower had not fallen out with Red Flag, the Maoists would have easily formed a glowernment by now. If only Comrade Upadro was still in the good books of Mahan Thakur, the grand coalition would have formed a government so long ago, it would have been time to bring it down already.

But what really puzzles me is why PM Oily is so unperturbed. What does he know that we don't. Does he have another rabbit up his sleeves? Is he hiding a trump card under his hat? Why is he crying wolf in a China shop?

Those of us who watched the high drama of the latest episode of the tele serial The Great Hall of the People last week will all agree that it showed Nepali politics at its all-time best and the protagonists all deserve to be nominated for the NEFTA Film Award in the Best Supporting Role category.

No one in the world can stab each other in the back as figuratively as they do. No world leader can play the fiddle on a tilting deck like our rulers. Few countries in the world have a stockpile of serial prime ministers that they can fall back on in times of crisis: KPO, MKN, PKD, SBD, BRB, JNK, BURP.

The whole point about Monday's pseudo-drama at the Birendra Intercontinental Conventional Centre was to waste time to buy time to haggle some more about whose turn it is to do nothing for two years. The leaders agreed to disagree some more so they could get the Prez to give themselves another three days to do some more horse-trading, even though

horses I know would not take kindly to being traded like politicians.

Nepal's legislature is beginning to resemble a goat market, where the animals can be bought and sold, just to be decapitated at the crack of dawn. Or, you could say Nepali politics is now similar to a bull-fight, only that real oxymorons are smarter. Some may say it's like a cock-fight, but that would be a slur on all you good roosters out there. You could say the politicians are behaving like wolves in sheep's clothing, but that would belittle both predator and prey. And without belittling the serpents (some of them venomous) in our midst, who shall remain nameless, allow me to unequivocally state that parliament resembles a snake pit. If this political stalemate drags on any longer, the Ass may be forced to stake its claim to prime ministership.

In fact, my legal advisers have just asked me to take this opportunity to quickly issue a pre-emptive public disclaimer about speciest language that might crop up in future in this column. So, here goes: The views and opinions expressed hereinafter are not those of any donkey we know and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Animal Kingdom in general and Assdom in particular. Any information, opinion, slur, insult or slander in or between these lines are not intended to malign any cold blooded reptile or bloody-thirsty predator.

Now that we have those legal niceties out of the way, let me conclude my remarks this week by saying that any resemblance that any vulture, piranha, shark, hyena, pig, jackal, (and, yes, even an ass) bears with Nepal's human politicians, living or dead, is purely coincidental.



The Ass

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