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GLACIAL RETREAT:
The Tso Rolpa Glacier has grown 7 times in size in the past 55 years, threatening the Tama Kosi Valley downstream. There are at least a dozen other dangerously-full glacial lakes in the Nepal Himalaya.

RASTRARAJ BHANDARI

In other news

If we were not all consumed by the coronavirus pandemic at the moment, we would be worrying about the impact of climate change. Hopefully sooner, rather than later, the COVID-19 outbreak will fade away.

We will then have to go back to where we left off to address a far greater long-term threat not just to human beings, but also all other species on this planet. In January, just as first reports were coming out of a virus outbreak in Wuhan scientists were issuing dire predictions about how the land, air and sea was warming much faster than previously thought – and how this would have catastrophic impact on life on Earth.

Millions would die of heat stress, climate migrants would be driven out of coastal cities, food supplies would run out with

droughts and floods, there would be continental-scale fires. But politicians in many countries continued to be in denial.

When the coronavirus crisis is over, the world has to show the same resolve in addressing the root causes of the climate emergency, and cut emissions, allow forests to grow back, alter food habits, change the consumption patterns and endless consumerism. Time will tell if world governments will learn from the pandemic to act together with the resolve they have not yet shown in dealing with the climate.

Here in Nepal, the virus has not spread as aggressively as elsewhere. We do not know why. Maybe it is just lurking undetected, waiting for the right moment to strike. But this much vilified government

has shown uncharacteristic resolve in risking economic collapse to prevent the spread of the virus. That same determination is needed to address the climate crisis.

How much fossil carbon Nepal burns is not making a big difference on the planet, but our dependence on imported petroleum is going to add to the huge economic burden of the pandemic. Nepal has to reboot its development model, switch to renewable energy, aim for agricultural self-sufficiency (See editorial, page 2), and halt destructive infrastructure construction. All this demands

visionary leadership and good governance which is in short supply.

The impact of the climate emergency is already being felt throughout Nepal: melting

glacial ice means too much water in some places, and in others springs have gone dry due to extreme weather events. As Rastraraj Bhandari reports in this issue (page 8-9) Nepal needs to mitigate the danger of glacial lake bursts, as well as help farmers adapt to erratic monsoons and water scarcity. But it needs to cut fossil use to save the economy.

The reduction of global emissions due to the worldwide lockdown is temporary. China has already announced reverting to coal to kick-start its economy as it revives after the pandemic (page 8-9). Other nations will try to ratchet up fossil fuel extraction.

Like the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis needs a global strategy. Here in Nepal we need local action. 🇳🇵

Kunda Dixit

**BACK TO THE
FUTURE OF
FARMING
EDITORIAL
PAGE 2**

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GOING PLACES TOGETHER

Back to the future of farming

The COVID-19 lockdown by the government is an effort at 'primary protection', and builds on the experience of how other countries have flattened the peak. Nepalis have taken the lockdown in their stride, perhaps because of the hardships suffered during past 'bandhs', as well as the earthquake and Blockade of 2015.

A survey last week showed that there is strong support for the measures the government has taken so far against the COVID-19. Awareness about the virus and what we must do to protect ourselves is high. But people are afraid of the disease, and are worried about the future.



LISA CHOEGYAL

Indeed, as a nation we must now look beyond the horizon of the national quarantine period to matters related to food security and employment. Job loss in the country and a slump in overseas employment will introduce great social distress.

While employment generation is a medium- to long-term concern, more urgent is sustaining agricultural production, ensuring a fair price for farmers, and access to market. The climate and soil of Nepal are fertile and productive, but past neglect, the drift of educated youth away from the land, and now the climate crisis has affected agriculture production.

Across Nepal, fields and terraces are barren or are reverting to jungle. The elderly are left managing the farm, while others move to the roadhead for schooling, or living off remittance. In the Tarai, once Nepal's grain basket, agricultural activity is affected by urbanisation, salination and depletion of ground water.

And now we have a pandemic lockdown. The message that has to go out is that farm work cannot wait, and it is safe to be in the fields (*see page 4*). Some farmers are waking up at 4AM to bring in the harvest, such secrecy is not needed. It is the maize planting season, and that should be allowed to go ahead as normal.

A group of nine eminent citizens this week put out an 'Appeal on Agriculture':

Save the Farm, Empower Farmers, Enhance Agriculture' which insists that agriculture is an essential activity during the COVID-19 crisis. It also urged the government to embark on a long-term strategy to make farming a sustainable and employment creating sector.

There is a surplus of milk and vegetables right now, and immediate action needs to be taken to ensure that there is market access for both consumers and producers. The government must support distribution, and Nepal's much vaunted cooperative sector which has mostly concentrated in money lending must come forward as a partner.

Farming in Nepal has suffered depletion of resources and interest, which is why Nepal has turned from a net exporter to an importer of most foodstuff. It is not enough, of course, to ask citizens to go back to the land. Farming has to be made attractive and profitable as a profession.

It is clear that those who have abandoned farming will not go back to the back-breaking work of their parents and ancestors. Young people who remain on the farm are seen by society as failures in life. This attitude needs to change.

The coronavirus pandemic provides Nepal with an opportunity to bring back agriculture as a pillar of the economy, providing employment and food security for the people and self-sufficiency to the nation. Nepal can create jobs in the service industry and manufacturing, but these will not be enough

for the volume of returnees from Gulf, Malaysia and India due to the global economic downturn.

Farming must adjust to new realities and find a mix between tradition and innovation. For example, the organic produce could open up as a good source for internal consumption as well as export, as has already begun to happen. System of Rice Intensification to raise paddy harvests, mechanised agriculture, new methods of irrigation, from drip farming to aquaponic agriculture must be promoted. While we must try to save indigenous seeds and livestock, we must not shut ourselves off from new cash crops suited to Nepal's diverse topography and climate.

The world economy and industrial agriculture has been on an unsustainable path because of the way it damaged nature. Going back to normal after the pandemic subsidies is not an option. It was this 'normal' that got us in this mess.

Agriculture Minister Ghanshyam Bhusal must take it as a campaign to restore priority to the kind of farming that can create jobs, distribute income, ensure sustainability and resilience to fight the next crisis the world throws at us.

In the post-pandemic era, the economy must be recalibrated to give agriculture the priority it deserved, but never got

ONLINE PACKAGES



MELTING MOUNTAINS

Tso Rolpa glacial lake has grown seven times in size since 1957, if it bursts it could affect up to 650,000 people downstream. But many locals think climate change is a hoax. Join us on a trip to the scenic, but dangerously full lake to see how precarious it is. Story: *page 8-9*.



UNCOVERING LOCKDOWN

Watch Nepal's photojournalists cover a public health crisis that needs them to maintain physical distance while their job requires them to get close to their subjects. Access the video in the *Nepali Times* Instagram and YouTube channel.

COVID-19 CHRONICLES

The real lessons are quite simple: intervene early, test and isolate ('What Nepal can learn from China about COVID-19', Raunab Singh Khatri, nepalitimes.com). And keep politics and prejudice out of it.

Pankaj Nepali

■ Authoritarian government that failed: Iran. Democratic governments that succeeded: Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong. Perhaps the better question is about the underpinning Eastern and Western epistemologies and socially normative behaviours.

Emile Young

■ It seems like theory worth exploring ('Could an anti-TB vaccine be protecting Nepal?', Prabhas Pokharel, *page 4*).

Padam Swar

■ Surely we can end world poverty if we apply the same gusto to it as we are doing to the current pandemic ('Poverty - the real pandemic', Bikash Gauchan, #1004). Modern economics is just that- a con! Call for global recalibration now!

Amius Lennie

■ Here is one more article that we in the West really should read. And think!

Torsten Åhs

■ 'Don't eat wild animals. Leave them alone in their habitat. That should be the main learning.

Raghu Shrestha

■ The real question should be 'whether capitalism or socialism works better in a crisis like this.' From what I've seen so far - when capitalists are in crisis - they turn to socialism for answers.

Alex Ferguson

■ How fantastic it would be to have direct flights to Kathmandu from Australia in the future ('Aussies and Kiwis homeward bound from Nepal', Lisa Choegyal, *page 3*). Let's look forward to Nepal 2021 for the year that many Aussies visit this amazing country. I will definitely be going!

Martyn Cook

■ Just shows how us Nepalis can get the job done. Feeling proud of NA post 1990 for a smooth flight and a grand touch down in Down Under.

Sameer Rana

■ Bring our Nepali migrant workers back from the borders ('Lockdown limbo in no man's land', Deepak Kharel, #1004). Quarantine them once they cross and then if they are well, let them go home.

Abhaya Subba Weise

WHAT'S TRENDING



Lockdown limbo in no man's land

by *Deepak Kharel*

800 Nepalis are stranded on the other side of the border in India amidst Nepal's coronavirus lockdown. Some even swam across the fast flowing Mahakali River in Darchula district risking their lives to enter Nepal. Visit nepalitimes.com for the latest developments.

f Most reached and shared on Facebook



Enlisting female health volunteers to fight COVID-19

by *Ramu Sapkota and Mukesh Pokhrel*

What is more useful in combatting coronavirus in remote parts of Nepal without medical services: a mobile app or a grassroots health volunteer? Go online to read expert opinion on effective contact tracing and surveillance for COVID-19 in Nepal.

t Most popular on Twitter

Could an anti-TB vaccine be protecting Nepalis?

by *Prabhas Pokharel*

Low-income countries in South Asia have so far recorded fewer cases. Could the anti-tuberculosis BCG vaccine be protecting Nepalis from a more aggressive spread of the virus? Opinions among health experts is divided. Follow the online debate.

🔍 Most visited online page

What Nepal can learn from China about COVID-19

by *Raunab Singh Khatri*

China's experience in dealing with COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a debate about whether authoritarianism or democracy works better in a crisis like this. The piece generated heated debate online about how China handled the outbreak. Join the discussion.

💬 Most commented

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Some of Nepal's main media groups stopped print editions and went #digital-only after the #NepalLockdown. Despite the popularity of online media, print is still the agenda-setter.

Chun B. Gurung @Chun_Gurung
Yes! 'Print still in power' @ShashiTharoor published a research-based article in 2017 @wef. Agreed w/@Madhu2067@kirannepal @GauranShiva@sudheerktm@kundadixipaywall system works only in developed countries not in developing nations!

dharmaadhikari @dharmaadhikari
No, nope, not any longer. Audience is the king, platform the princess. Print only the courtier, rallying for a vanishing glory. This is more about marketing psychology. I was expecting NT would surely (and directly) ask publishers: how many copies they do actually publish /day?

Mahabir Paudyal @mahabirpudyal
Fine observation by @NepaliTimes. I think no single media outlet, print or digital, should have a "powerful agenda-setting role," in a country like Nepal where public opinion can be easily swayed and right can be projected as wrong and vice-versa.

Ghanashyam @npPoet
Time to revisit printing decision? I'm really missing @NepaliTimes on Fridays. @KanakManiDixit @kundadixit @kirannepal

Arun Budhathoki @arunbudhathoki
NT is wrong about this. Print media is no longer the agenda-setter -- they too depend on their online platform to set it.

Dipak Gyawali @dipak_gyawali
Really there is no substitute for holding a newspaper or an actual book in hand and reading it. Computer screen just does not make the cut!

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

In the issue #497 9-15 April 2010 of *Nepali Times*, 10 years ago, we printed an article written by Ambassador Bhekh Bahadur Thapa, titled 'Diplomatic Disaster'. The former ambassador analyses Nepal becoming more dependent than ever before in its history on neighbouring countries India and China. Excerpts:

'The year 2066 will go down in history as a time when Nepal became more dependent than ever before on the outside world. Diplomatically speaking, it was a year of uncertainty, difficulty and a lack of clarity.

While the Indians have traditionally been active across the board, the Chinese were focused more on trade and economic cooperation. Both countries prefer to work behind the scenes to influence decisions. Recent years have shown that China may also be trying to exert influence not just to counter its traditional rival, but also to reflect its growing international stature. Indo-Nepal relations are influenced less by what New Delhi wants and more by our leaders' beggarly conduct, based on selfish rather than broad national interests, even to the extent of inviting interference in interpersonal and intra party conflicts.'



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JET, SET, GO: For the Nepal Airlines crew, this was their first ever flight to Australia, posing with the Australian Ambassador Pete Budd and Emma Stone

Aussies and Kiwis back home from Nepal

The saga of getting back home down under after Nepal suspended all international flights

The plane flew in an elegant arc silhouetted against the sunset far above some lazily circling raptors, a victory lap around the purple hills of the Kathmandu Valley before heading southeast. Who would have thought a single Nepal Airlines wheels-up could be such a triumph, but in the empty skies over a locked down South Asia, this take-off was something truly exceptional.



SO FAR SO GOOD
Lisa Choegyal

After days of frenetic work and delicate negotiations, the Australian Embassy team in Kathmandu had achieved a commercial charter to repatriate stranded tourists back home. The infinitely complex exercise involved the governments of Nepal, Australia and New Zealand at a time when travel restrictions were becoming ever more stringent in an effort to halt the coronavirus' gallop around the globe. Considering there was so little air traffic anywhere, it was all excessively complicated.

Summoned by government advisories, many Aussies and Kiwis returned home before the ban, but those remaining emerged from the mountains, meditation and yoga retreats, family visits, or simply had left it too late to leave. For

the trapped tourists clinging to the Australian Embassy lifeline, hopes were raised then dashed.

Since the surprise suspension of international flights, angst-ridden rumours ricocheted around 'Stranded-in-Nepal' online chats and Facebook chronicled the roller-coaster dynamics. Qatar Airways morphed into Nepal Airlines as the carrier, and Brisbane replaced Sydney as the destination when it was deemed that quarantine facilities were already full.

Never before has Nepal Airlines flown to Australia, so this was in effect its inaugural flight down under. Permissions had to be sought to overfly eight countries between Kathmandu and Brisbane, exemptions were required even to transit Australian airports, and connections had to be guaranteed with the ever dwindling trans-Tasman flight options – Air New Zealand obligingly adjusted their departure time by several hours to suit us.

Decisions, revisions, changes and adjustments became highly political under the escalating epidemic, allegedly needing sign off by cabinet members and prime ministers. Every passenger would be subject to 14 days isolation at their destination, to slow the spread and flatten the curve. Decision makers were jittery from failures in other cooperative evacuations: in Peru last week a bunch of aggressively disappointed New Zealanders had been off-loaded

COVID-19

from an Australian flight.

Such were the ever-evolving uncertainties and behind-the-scenes diplomacies, that it was not until Monday that all the pieces were in place for the New Zealand government to announce that the Wednesday flight was viable with permissions and connections to get Kiwis back home to Auckland from Nepal. Final landing permission was only granted from Canberra on the morning of departure, which was just as well as by then 250 excited passengers had confirmed and paid, 27 of them New Zealanders.

Each person had a story. It had been a fraught week tracking tourists and trekkers, and reassuring frantic families, themselves in isolation at home. A crisis helpline in Wellington supported desperate travellers marooned around the world. I talked to one couple who even considered marriage to enable their evacuation, but border security solved their predicament by expediting the additional paperwork required by the COVID-19 crisis at exemplary speed.

As the shuttle buses disgorged passengers loaded with backpacks and baggage, relief, stress and excitement reverberated around

the deserted Kathmandu airport. Face masks were distributed, temperatures checked, and notices reminded us to remain one metre socially distanced.

Check-in was not without its drama. Some couples were not seated together who wanted to be, and some were seated together who did not want to be. A lost phone was found and a lost passport was not, resulting in some high-level fancy footwork resolved only at the very last minute. The one shop open in the terminal made a killing in overpriced chocolate and fizzy drinks. "Sorry, no cappuccinos only black coffee. The cows are on lockdown."

Photos and selfies were snapped, and the Nepali flight crew politely posed in their distinctive uniforms and Sherpa-striped aprons. The Australian Ambassador was ubiquitous in his dark suit and reassuring smile, chatting with families and fielding calls from the foreign minister. The rest of us workers rushed around, distinctive in lurid yellow official vests with high-vis silver strips, attempting to smooth the airport processing. Most were grateful and gracious, only a handful still grumpy and unsettled by such unprecedented events.

For the last two days tickets had been issued and payments collected amidst the sunny flowerbeds, friendly dogs and shady trees of the embassy gardens in Bansbari. With a boarding pass in hand and

the new RA airbus in sight on the tarmac, I watched the strain and confusion of the past week begin to evaporate, tensions to relax, anxiety levels to ease, and new friendships to coalesce.

Once the 250 had made their laborious way through immigration, security and into the departure lounge, festooned with hand bags, day packs and children, I started to think that this flight might actually happen.

Thanks to meticulous pre-planning by the Aussies and our New Zealand team based in Delhi, plus the coordinated efforts of Nepal Airlines, Bon Travel, Nepal Police, airport authorities, health, immigration, security and many others, the assault course of bureaucratic hurdles had apparently been successfully navigated. The experienced New Zealand High Commissioner in Delhi was monitoring by WhatsApp: 'I'll only believe it when the plane is off the ground.'

With the last of the check-ins complete, I was making my way upstairs when a familiar voice stopped me in my tracks. "Hey Lisa, this is my first visit to Australia, what a thrill, please say something for my blog." It took me some moments to recognise Captain Vijay Lama of Nepal Airlines obscured by a stylish black face mask under a braided cap, wielding his iPhone in record mode, and burdened with a collection of travel cases.

His thick hair was greayer than when we served together as judges for Miss Nepal 2004, but Vijay's energy and charm was undiminished. "The closest I came was acting in Everest, the Hollywood movie about New Zealand mountaineers! I'd love to meet the Australian Ambassador who has accomplished this historic maiden flight."

Basking in Vijay's charismatic wake, we sped through security and strode into the departure lounge. A frisson of recognition swept through the cavernous hall as every local spotted the celebrity pilot, actor, singer and television presenter – a good proportion of the flight were Australians of Nepali origin and Nepalis with permanent residency.

The Ambassador finished addressing his departing throng, emphasising the unique circumstances that surrounded the national flag carrier's first ever flight to Australia. Cameras clicked as I introduced him to the superstar captain, his smile dazzling: "Now I know that today our passengers are homeward bound in the very best of hands." 🇳🇵

Lisa Choegyal writes the So Far So Good fortnightly column for Nepali Times, and is the Honorary Consul for New Zealand in Nepal.

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WORK FOR FOOD

Upkeep of agriculture during the lockdown will keep Nepal fed, make the country more self-reliant and resilient



SEAN SHOEMAKER

We must all look beyond these times of fear and uncertainty and plan forward to Dasain, Tihar and Chhat festivals. This year Dasain is 24-27 October, Tihar 13-16 November and Chhat a week later.

These are family and community festivals, a time for get-togethers at a time when we should be careful about getting together. Last week's Bisket Jatra



1/2 FULL
Anil Chitrakar

in Bhaktapur was cancelled. Machindranath chariot pulling is unlikely and even Indra Jatra looks iffy. We will be locked in our homes for Nepali New Year Day on 13 April.

So far, Nepal has been lucky. But to keep the virus from spreading in our communities we need to take steps today. Keep strictly to lockdown rules, maintain physical distance even within the family, not so much to protect ourselves but to protect others.

These actions have to be at the level of the individual and community, as well as at all three levels of government. The idea is simple. You plant marigold, you harvest it after the monsoon, make garlands, sell it and pay for the family to have new clothes and sweet dishes. If you do nothing now, it will be a miserable festival. And Nepal's festivals are intimately tied to our crop cycles.

The rains have been good to Nepal this winter, and we have to believe that the monsoon will arrive on time and stay strong.

The current maize-planting season and the upcoming rainy season are opportunities to ensure that no Nepali goes hungry and ensure food security for Nepal at these difficult and uncertain times (*see Editorial, page 2*). The government should be proactively telling farmers that the lockdown does not include them, as long as they maintain physical distance.

Oral lore tell us that Kathmandu Valley once suffered a 12-year drought and the Boudhanathstupa was built with dew drops and hence called *Khasti* – the dew drop stupa. Droughts are nothing new,

but they may get more severe and frequent in future with the climate crisis.

Rice seedlings and the terrace farms must be prepared for the monsoon paddy planting season. But this year, we must also prepare for a possible shortage of workers. The COVID-19 slowdown will drive wages up, and increase the price of fresh vegetables and staples. For farmers this is not necessarily bad news, but we have to adapt to a new post-coronavirus economy.

Communities across Nepal have built and maintained irrigation canals for centuries. The

government and its foreign partners have also paid for thousands of kilometers of irrigation canals across this country. Some are working well, others need to be repaired and upgraded. The time is now to do that.

That way, we create jobs, workers get wages, and agriculture production goes up. We are then able to pay people for the work they do and also ensure that all have plenty of food for the coming year, and something to celebrate during the harvest festivals this autumn.

This is not food for work, it is work for food. The upkeep of

Nepal's agricultural infrastructure during the lockdown will yield dividends far into the future, keep us fed, make us more self-reliant and resilient.

Water is the most important input for us to be food secure. Yet, three-fourths of Nepal's farms are still rain-fed, but this can change with a nationwide campaign to extend irrigation. Water sources need protection, watersheds need to be managed, depleted groundwater tables need to be recharged by reviving ponds.

COVID-19

Many communities now have seed banks, a thriving seed production business and there are technologies that help with crop resilience. There is even a variety of rice that can live through weeks of inundation, or paddy that survives droughts.

Change in human behaviour requires incentive. The thought of enjoying the autumn festival could be what we need to get us all to get up and prepare the soil, get the seeds into the ground, spread the fertiliser and then look at the sky for the first signs of the monsoon.

We survived a ten year armed conflict, the earthquake, the Blockade and now we must outlive a pandemic. Waiting and doing nothing, and even worse, hoping that the government and political parties will bring us out of this crisis is no longer an option.

Many countries that took in able bodied Nepalis as labour in the past may be sending them back. We have to welcome them, not as extra mouths to feed, but extra hands to get Nepal back on its feet to feed itself. 🇳🇵

Anil Chitrakar is President of Siddharthinc.

Could anti-TB vaccine be protecting Nepalis?

Can't be sure until more tests are done, researchers say

Prabhas Pokharel

Researchers have been puzzled about why while the COVID-19 pandemic ravages China, Europe and now North America, low-income countries in South Asia have so far recorded fewer cases.

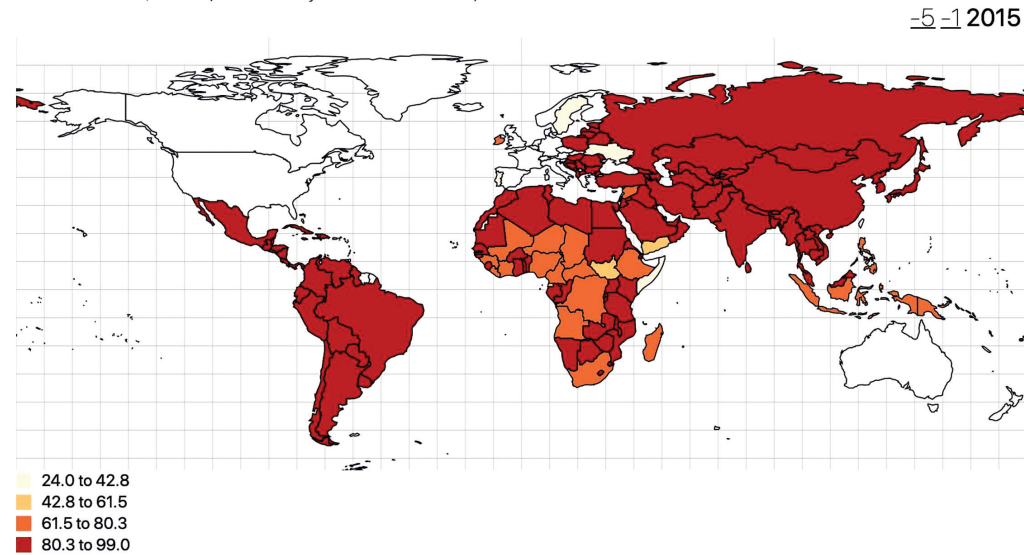
Public health experts say one reason is that the poorer countries just do not have enough kits to screen populations at risk for the virus. But others maintain that even if there were a lot of infected people around, the coronavirus is not spreading in the subcontinent as aggressively as elsewhere.

There are many theories floating around to explain this, including the 'hygiene hypothesis' which seems to show that South Asians have developed a resistance to new viruses because the environment is not as sterile as in industrialised countries. Other scientists have speculated that countries with a high incidence of malaria seem to be relatively less affected, and have even proposed chloroquine as a cure.

One theory that appears more plausible is that people in countries that administer the anti-tuberculosis vaccine BCG (Bacillus Calmette-Guerin) seem to be less susceptible to COVID-19. Even before this pandemic, there had been epidemiological studies that indicated higher immune levels in people with BCG against communicable diseases, including viral infections.

Could Nepal's surprisingly low caseload of novel coronavirus be attributed to the BCG vaccine which has been widely used in the population for the past five decades? The BCG vaccine campaign started in Nepal in 1979 under Expanded Program on Immunisation of the World Health Organisation (WHO), and since then millions of Nepalis have been

Immunization, BCG (% of one-year-old children) – Tuberculosis



inoculated with it.

The rates of morbidity and mortality from COVID-19 vary greatly in different parts of the world, and scientists have been trying to understand why. For example countries like Italy, the Netherlands and the United States that never had a comprehensive BCG vaccination program appear to be disproportionately impacted. There are now tests going on in several laboratories in Europe to see if this is indeed true.

"If you superimpose a map of the world with coronavirus over countries that had a BCG vaccine program, there appears to be less virulent spread of COVID-19 in countries that inoculated children against tuberculosis. The number of cases may still be high, but the fatality rate is lower in BCG countries,"

explains Sameer Mani Dixit, a researcher at the Centre for Molecular Dynamics in Kathmandu.

He adds that the BCG is not an anti-virus vaccine, but seems to build the body's immunity not just against tuberculosis, but also from viral infections. Recent research suggests that live attenuated vaccine like BCG stimulates the immune system and protects against wide range of diseases. It is also important to note that the vaccine is by no means perfect, as it prevents about 60% of TB cases among children. In addition, the vaccine is less effective in preventing TB that affects the lungs and works better against severe forms of TB, such as tuberculosis meningitis.

BCG vaccine's effectiveness against

COVID-19 is a hypothesis that is yet to be tested, researchers are starting clinical trials in Australia, the Netherlands and Germany that should answer the questions surrounding BCG in the near future. The trials are being conducted on people at high risk of exposure, primarily health care personnel.

Buddha Basnyat, a physician at Patan Hospital believes that without randomised control trials the efficacy of BCG against COVID-19 is "just a conjecture", and the tests need to prove beyond doubt that there is a correlation.

"The link is unknown and it would require a lot of scientific studies to find the truth. Only, when the results of clinical trials are out can we be absolutely certain. In medicine, association is not enough, we need to show causal linkages, especially when there are so many confounding variable. Until then nothing is concrete," adds Basnyat.

Furthermore, it is also necessary to know for how long does the positive effects induced by BCG lasts in the immune system. Nepalis were vaccinated with BCG as infants, would that protect them as adults? Keeping a vigilant eye on the number of novel coronavirus cases in the BCG vaccinated countries is important. An exponential spread of COVID-19 cases in India could knock out the hypothesis completely, and there is also no explanation why China which has near universal BCG coverage was so badly hit.

We could be clinging to straws, hoping that the BCG vaccine will save the day, but the authenticity of the hypothesis cannot be established till it is explored through rigorous clinical trials. Till then, public health experts warn, Nepal needs to maintain its lockdown, test and isolate groups around the country, especially western Nepal where tens of thousands of Nepali workers have come in from India in recent weeks. 🇳🇵

Sonia Awale

With the detection of three new COVID-19 cases in Kailali district on Saturday, one of them the country's first case of community transmission, western Nepal could be the epicentre for two disasters: a coronavirus hot spot, and a ticking time bomb for a mega-earthquake.

This is not scare-mongering. Public health experts say western Nepal's rudimentary healthcare system will be overwhelmed by a possible COVID-19 outbreak because at least 120,000 Nepali workers have returned from India without screening before both countries went into lockdown.

The government is extending rapid diagnostic testing to hospitals in Nepalganj, Dhangadi, Surkhet and Dadeldhura and there may be a surge in positive cases in the days ahead.

However, there is another Damocle's Sword that has been hanging over the region even before novel coronavirus – the likelihood of a catastrophic mega-earthquake. As Nepal marks the fifth anniversary of its 2015 earthquake, seismologists have warned that an even bigger megaquake is not a question of 'if' but 'when'.

The region between Pokhara and Nepal's western border with India has not had a major earthquake since 1505 when an estimated 8.9M tremor killed one third of Kathmandu Valley's population including the king, devastated north India, and created the debris fan from a cataclysmic flood on which Pokhara city is situated today.

Speaking with *Nepali Times*, seismologist Roger Bilham warned five years ago that the 2015 was not the Big One. He said the seismic gap in western Nepal had accumulated tremendous tectonic energy that had not been released for 500 years, and an earthquake was long overdue.

"There's a plenty of stress stored for an earthquake above 8 magnitude in western Nepal, and it could kill at least 100,000 people in Nepal alone," says Surya Narayan Shrestha of the National Society for Earthquake Technology (NSET). "But despite being the most at risk, western Nepal is less prepared and has relatively low awareness about earthquake safety, and this doubles its vulnerability."

In two weeks, Nepal will mark the fifth anniversary of the 25 April 2015 earthquake, yet neither the government nor the people seem to have learnt the lesson. Western Nepal, in particular, is ill-equipped to handle another major earthquake.

An 8.5M quake in western Nepal would be felt even more strongly in Kathmandu Valley than the 7.8M disaster five years ago. Still, disaster preparedness experts



NSET

Epicentre of two disasters in West Nepal

Besides preparing for a possible COVID-19 outbreak, western Nepal also has to be ready for a future mega-earthquake



say attention should now turn from the 14 districts in Central Nepal affected in 2015 to western Nepal.

Before the COVID-19 lockdown, NSET with support from development partners had begun to retrofit 2,200 classrooms in 200 schools in four western districts Bardia, Surkhet, Jumla

and Achham to be completed in four years. Prior to 2015, NSET had similarly retrofitted 300 schools inside Kathmandu Valley which survived the earthquake and served as emergency shelters. However, nearly 8,000 schools were completely destroyed in 2015, and colossal loss of lives was averted

only because the earthquake struck on a Saturday.

"We selected the schools in western Nepal based on vulnerability, potential for replication, availability of masons and enthusiasm of the school management committee," adds Shrestha. "Next step is to scale this up and this means more investment, technical support and massive mobilisation of human resources."

Hospitals in western Nepal at the moment are all on red alert for a possible outbreak of COVID-19 in the region and healthcare workers are keenly aware of shortages of life-saving medical equipment such as test kits, ventilators, ICU beds, oxygen and personal



reconstruction to turn the institution into an eco-friendly, earthquake resistant facility. A disaster management protocol was also drawn up for triage in its emergency, as well as in and out patient buildings.

Gauchan says hospitals in the Far West have to be prepared for multiple disasters: "We can't overhaul our system every time a disaster strikes, be it the coronavirus or an earthquake. We need a standard operating protocol based on concrete national guidelines."

Back in 2003, Nepal government in collaboration with WHO had conducted earthquake vulnerability assessment of 15 major hospitals across the country that recommended they all be retrofitted. More than 15 years later, except from minor strengthening of health clinics, nothing has been done.

Hope now rests on the newly formed National Risk Reduction and Disaster Management Authority (DMA) which will replace the National Reconstruction Authority set up after 2015. Experts hope the focus will now shift to strengthening infrastructure of public buildings, transmission lines, telecommunication, sewage and water supply.

Says Surya Narayan Shrestha at NSET: "We spent the last five years mostly in the reconstruction of residential building and heritage sites in Central Nepal. Our priority now is on reinforcing infrastructure and ensuring essential services are better equipped to survive the next big one." 🇳🇵

Preparing to be prepared

Nepal was just beginning preparations for risk reduction and management of disasters like earthquakes, floods, landslides and epidemics when the 2015 earthquake struck. This year, the Disaster Management Authority (DMA) has been formed which has listed 22 different kinds of disasters Nepalis are exposed to.

The winter of 2017 saw 48 fatalities in a cold wave in the Tarai. Two years later, no one died in a similar cold wave. The Home Ministry's Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Working Committee is credited with such pre-preparedness for blizzards, cold and heat waves, and monsoon floods.

An average of 700 people die every year in Nepal due to disasters, most of these are weather related. The climate crisis is exacerbating extreme rainfall events, and the ministry has drawn up a Monsoon Emergency Workplan to address increased frequency and intensity for floods.

"We have to be prepared, and preparation is most effective when it is at the local level since they are the first responders," says Anil Pokhrel of the DMA. With the help of the British aid agency DfID and the World Food Programme (WFP) the government is setting up Humanitarian Staging Areas in all seven provinces for stockpiling food and relief material for disasters. The central station was in operation at Kathmandu airport during the 2015 earthquake.

New staging areas in Dhangadi and Nepalganj were inaugurated by British Ambassador Nicola Pollitt and WFP's Pippa Bradford recently



(pictured). Western Nepal is important because of the special seismic risk there. Each staging area can address the emergency needs of up to 70,000 people at a time. The staging areas house tents, health and sanitation kits, water purifying equipment, fuel storage, satellite phones, search and rescue equipment and pre-positioned water supply.

Proximity to the airport allows the relief material to be helicoptered out to the affected areas, and also to be resupplied from Kathmandu, quickly.

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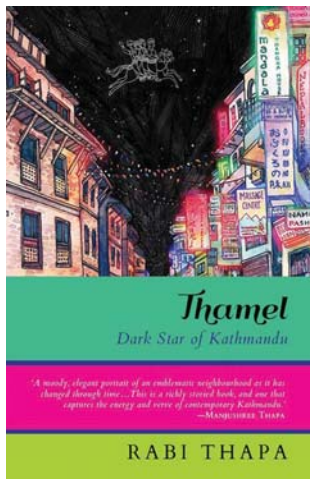
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SELF-ISOLATION

Suggested Books:

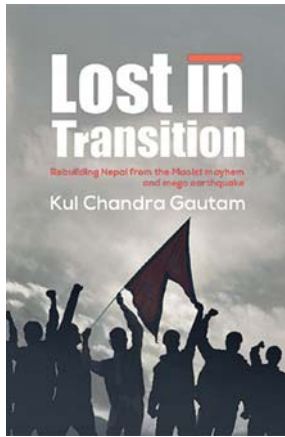


Thamel

In this beguiling biography of a neighbourhood transformed by globalised travel interspersed with accounts of real people – a recovering junkie, a band member, a sex worker, a nonagenarian shopkeeper- Rabi Thapa tells a poignant tale of the city we lost to time.

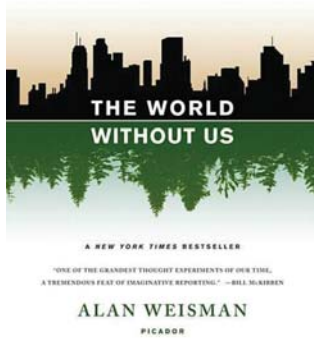
The Road

Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about a father and his son's journey toward the sea, set after an unspecified extinction event has wiped out most of humanity.



Lost in Transition

Kul Chandra Gautam's book offers a candid critique of what ails Nepal's politics and economy, and how to rebuild the country from the ruins of the prolonged armed conflict that pushed us into protracted transition, as well as the 2015 Nepal earthquake.



The World Without Us

In this non-fiction eco-thriller, Alan Weisman delves into the minutia of how our planet will change if mankind was wiped off its face.

The Princess Bride

Framed cleverly as an 'abridged' retelling of a centuries-old tale set in the fabled country of Florin, William Goldman's modern fantasy classic is rich in satire, and has characters you won't soon forget.

QUARANTINE

Suggested Movies on the Dish:



The Count of Monte Cristo

A young man, falsely imprisoned by his jealous friend, escapes and uses a hidden treasure to exact his revenge. Based on Alexandre Dumas' literary classic.
10 April, 10:35pm, HBO

Rio

When Blu, a domesticated macaw from small-town Minnesota, meets the fiercely independent Jewel, he takes off on an adventure to Rio de Janeiro with the bird of his dreams. Watch with your kids.
11 April, 1pm, HBO



Zootopia

In this animated kids' movie, a rookie bunny cop and a cynical con artist fox must work together to uncover a conspiracy in a city of anthropomorphic animals.
12 April, 3:15pm, HBO

Pitch Perfect

Beca, a freshman at Barden University, is cajoled into joining The Bellas, her school's all-girls singing group, and taking on their male rivals in a campus competition.
13 April, 5:55pm, HBO



The Manchurian Candidate

In the midst of the Gulf War, soldiers are kidnapped and brainwashed for sinister purposes.
15 April, 7:45pm, Cinemax

Fair Game

CIA operative Valerie Plame discovers her identity is allegedly leaked by the government as payback for an op-ed article her husband wrote criticising the Bush administration.
16 April, 9:15am, Cinemax

Mary Queen of Scots

Mary Stuart's attempt to overthrow her cousin Elizabeth I, Queen of England, finds her condemned to years of imprisonment before facing execution.
14 April, 8:45pm, HBO

CONTAINMENT

Podcasts we like:



The False Nine

3 fans sit down to discuss all things football, from the European leagues to the Nepali national team. Find **The False Nine** on Apple Podcasts.



Reply All

A podcast that features stories about how people shape the internet, how the internet shapes people, and how to survive the internet age.

How Did This Get Made

The hosts team up with new guests each episode to deconstruct some of the more outlandish films in cinema history.

Stuff You Should Know

Join the hosts as they get to the bottom of odd questions, like what the chaos theory is, if zombies exist and more.



The Asian Madness Podcast

Discussions about true crime, superstition, urban legends, mysteries, and weird news from across the Asian continent.

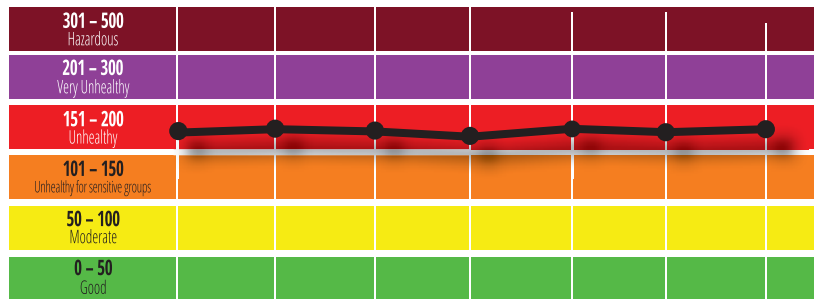


A cloud band on Wednesday swept the mountains with snowstorms, but no real precipitation elsewhere. There are no major systems on the horizon, which is bad news for the forest fires raging across various parts of Central Nepal that has covered the region in a pall of smoke. A plume of fine sand whipped up by wind in the Indian desert is also approaching that will thicken the haze. Some afternoon cloud buildup over the weekend in Kathmandu

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
27° 13°	27° 13°	28° 14°

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 3 - 9 April



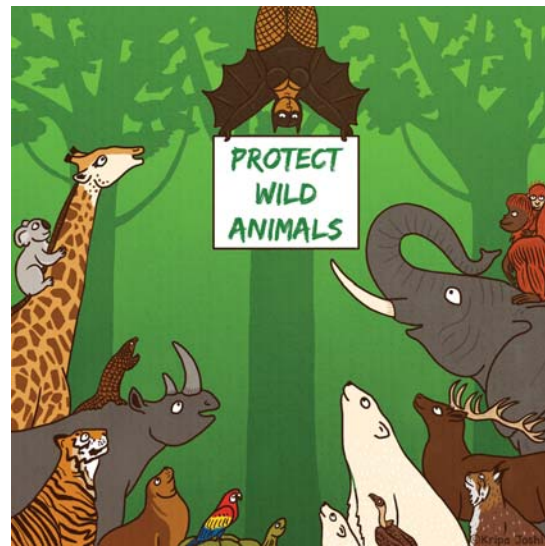
PM2.5	FRIDAY April 3	SATURDAY April 4	SUNDAY April 5	MONDAY April 6	TUESDAY April 7	WEDNESDAY April 8	THURSDAY April 9
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After a relatively cleaner air in the last few weeks due to the lockdown, the Air Quality Index (AQI) is as bad as ever. Which means it is not just vehicular emissions that was causing the pollution. The concentration of particulate matter smaller than 2.5 microns in Kathmandu's city centre picked up this week as a result of wildfires burning out of control in Dhading, Chitwan and Gorkha. Even the afternoon breeze does not lower the AQI from the 'Unhealthy' Red Zone.

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

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI



The recent pandemic has been a huge cost to human life and economies around the world. Many recent virus outbreaks, including COVID-19, have been linked to the wildlife trade. People hunt and trade animals for food, medicine and trophies and in the process cause the destruction and decline of many species and their habitats. But we are a part of an ecosystem that is complex and relies on a balance of plants, animals and marine life. Their destruction also affects us... and our survival.

OUR PICK



Earlier this year, South Korean black comedy, *Parasite* gathered accolades in all major award ceremonies for its stellar storyline and cinematography. Here is another treat from the same director Bong Joon-ho—*Okja*. The 2017 action-adventure film is about a girl who raises a genetically modified superpig. The ensemble cast includes the likes of Byun Hee-bong, Yoon Je-moon, Choi Woo-shik, Tilda Swinton, Paul Dano and Jake Gyllenhaal, among others.

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

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सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग

Unlocking yourself during the lockdown

It is Week 3 of the lockdown, and we have started missing our morning jogs and mourning for our expensive gym memberships. Home workouts always sound like an unrealistic and ineffective solution, but with an informative and encouraging app by your side, they can actually work.



AN APP A DAY
Saniaa Shah

And if you strictly follow a trusted app's guided workouts, you can actually be that fit friend who shows off his/her abs on Instagram. So, are you ready to meet your new gym buddy in the form of an app? 3, 2, 1... here we go!

NIKE TRAINING CLUB

The Nike Training Club app scores high on all fronts – design, experience, features, and brand integration. Nike loads the app with about 200 options, each with short videos of trainers demonstrating each move, position or exercise with deceptive ease and utter perfection. The best part is, the app is completely free.

Short workouts ranging from 5-20 minutes motivate beginners to hop onto the fitness train. Meanwhile, workouts attached with the intimidating tag 'Athlete' are also offered.

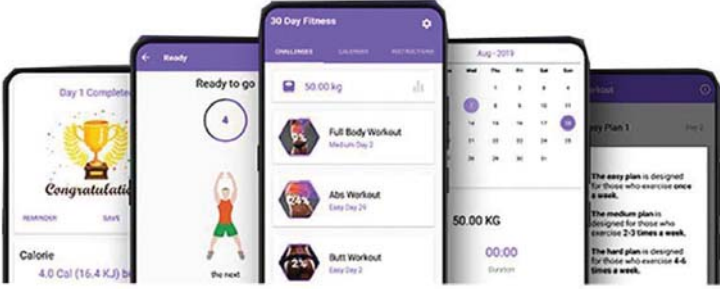
You can identify your workout for the day using specific filters, such as: Muscle Group (eg – Abs & Core), Workout Type (Endurance/Mobility/Strength/Yoga), and Equipment (from no equipment to full equipment). If you are not

sure and need some fitspiration, collections like 'Workouts That Boost Your Mood', 'Best of Abs, Arms and Glutes' or the quarantine favourite 'Big Workouts for Small Spaces' help get you started without wasting any time.

From simple tactics for better runs (tip: pre-run stretching and a proper cool-down are recommended) to yoga-inspired routines for individuals who enjoy more mindful movement, Nike seems to have thoughtfully built a one-stop fitness shop that caters to all kinds of people. It also has the option of set plans for 4, 6 or 8 weeks for you to pick from.

The Nike app connects seamlessly with Apple Watch, helping you track your drills, heart rate, calories and stats, without having to pull out your phone.

Nepali Times starts this An App a Day series to connect you to various Internet sites to make the lockdown bearable



30 DAY FITNESS CHALLENGE

Once you launch the 30 Day Fitness Challenge, it asks you whether you want to lose weight, get toned or build muscle, and rearranges its content accordingly for you. The app categorises its workouts based on areas of the body, and they all come with multiple levels (Easy, Medium or Hard) based on your experience.

Recording your training progress, daily reminder notifications and social media shareability are just some of the handy features. Entering your height, weight and Body Mass Index into the app will help you shape up and reach your #bodygoals.

Quick results require daily dietary discipline, therefore a detailed 30-day meal plan and weekly shopping lists are built into the app. Workouts don't work unless you are eating right.

YOGA | DOWN DOG

Not everybody is built for jumping jacks and burpees, some of us need an exercise plan that is more relaxed and reflective, with focus on mental health and meditative breathing while also building body strength and flexibility. The answer is yoga. Yoga | Down Dog is an excellent go-to app for yoga practice.

The app offers 'gentle' yoga for beginner yogis, hatha yoga with

beautiful standing poses, restorative yoga focused on stretching and relaxation without standing, chair yoga for when you are working from home and need a refreshing break without leaving the chair, and the celebrated surya namaskar, the ultimate asana that consists of a set of 12 poses repeated for good measure. Ending with a guided 10-minute 'yoga nidra' to top off your at-home yoga and tackle all the stress and anxiety you might be dealing with.

Because of the worldwide quarantine, the Yoga Down Dog app is free until 1 May 2020.

Until next week, stay home, and nama-stay. 🇳🇵

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Human face of a Himalayan



Janmu Sherpa who operates a small tea house in the village of Donggang climate change has experienced first hand, but says, "Let fate decide."



Akal Man Maharjan operates the Bajaj dealership in Charikot, and says most people think climate change is a conspiracy.



Fatalism and denial among mountain communities living downstream from a dangerous glacial lake

Rastraraj Bhandari in Dolakha

In a small riverbank community of Donggang below Mt Gauri Shankar, Janmu Sherpa runs a small tea house. The settlement has two families who are still rebuilding their homes after the earthquake five years ago. Janmu has a dozen goats, her primary companions in this wilderness near the Chinese border. The tea house is a rest stop for trekkers headed up to Tso Rolpa

glacial lake, or onwards to Tashi Lapsa Pass to Khumbu. With the Himalaya warming between 0.3-0.7°C faster than the global average, these mountains will lose at least one-third of their ice by the end of the century. And that is the best-case scenario, according to the *Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment: Climate Change, Sustainability and People* put together last year by

Kathmandu-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). The increased melting means melt water is accumulating in glacial lakes that absorb and transmit thermal energy to the glacier face, causing a positive-feedback loop and accelerating the thaw. The lakes are growing in size, and are at risk of bursting to flood downstream valleys. Glacial Lake

Outburst Floods (GLOF) can be caused by avalanches falling into the lakes, or by earthquakes. In the late 1990s, the risk of a GLOF event from Tso Rolpa led to panic among people living in the Tama Kosi Valley below. Scientists had been monitoring the lake which had grown seven times in size since 1957. Twenty years ago, the Nepal government with international

Climate, coronavirus and

How China rebuilds its economy after the pandemic will impact the climate crisis

As the COVID-19 pandemic grips the world, some have seen a silver lining in a reported decrease in carbon emissions and pollution levels. However, as China and other countries in Asia recover from the worst of the epidemic there are worries that air quality improvements will be short-lived as economies struggle to rebuild. Short-term economic growth will be at the expense of long-term environmental benefits, it is feared. As a first mover in post-COVID-19 recovery, China has the unique opportunity to revive its economy in a way that takes climate change into account, setting a precedent for other countries. The economic slowdown caused by measures to contain the pandemic has resulted in a direct, positive effect on the environment in China. Satellite images from NASA have shown a dramatic drop in pollution in the past few months, with the Yangtze River Delta region around Shanghai seeing a particularly dramatic reduction in pollution. By the first week of March, coal use in Chinese power stations hit a four-year low, domestic flights



have fallen by up to 70%, output of key steel products was at its lowest in five years, and official statistics suggest that output across key industrial sectors decreased by

up to 40%. Overall, scientists have found that the measures to contain COVID-19 cut at least a quarter of China's greenhouse gas emissions in just two weeks in mid-February.

There was hope that the virus would prove to be a wakeup call for Chinese policymakers. However, China's National Energy Administration (NEA) slashed solar

and offshore wind subsidies by half, regulators seem to be considering relaxing some emissions standards to support the hard hit automobile sector, and the government is working on approving 23 GW of new coal fired power capacity. China was already on this path even before the COVID-19 outbreak, with some suggesting that coal power would give China the edge in its trade war with the US. If China indeed rolls back its low-carbon transition, the consequences will have global impact. The nation is considered to be the flag bearer of international climate policy, since the US withdrawal from the 2015 Paris Agreement. The international climate movement is already shaky and US elections later this year will be pivotal in understanding the future of American engagement in global agreements on emission cuts. The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has just drastically relaxed rules removing liabilities for polluters for an undetermined period during the COVID-19 outbreak. On Wednesday Britain

climate crisis

Tso Rolpa glacial lake at 4,580m has grown seven times in size in the past 60 years due to global warming.



risk still exists as scientists reassess the state and vulnerability of the lake.

Out of the 1,466 glacial lakes in Nepal, 21 pose potential risks and six are considered to be at a high risk of an outburst. There have been at least 14 glacial lake flooding events recorded in the last decade in the region.

A future Tso Rolpa GLOF would cost lives, property, infrastructure development projects including hydropower plants, livelihood, tourism and trade, forest, pastures and fisheries. ICIMOD estimates the tangible damage of a lake burst would range from \$2-9 million depending on the duration, velocity and flooding level with almost 650,000 people up to 100km downstream affected.

However, people living along the Tama Kosi appear to be either oblivious or skeptical of the danger. Many think it is a hoax spread by the international community to mine precious stones. A hut next to the lake has a Maoist slogan that reads 'End American Imperialism, Long Live the Nepal Maoist Party'.

"Ordinary citizens cannot understand why else the government and foreigners would spend almost \$3 million dollars on

future climate change when many villages in the region urgently need proper schools, health-post and roads," explains Charikot resident Akal Man Maharjan.

Out of the 407 young undergraduate students from Dolakha and Kathmandu interviewed recently, more than one-third believed glacial flooding to be a hoax.

Janmu Sherpa is different. Despite having no formal education, her knowledge of global warming stems from her closeness to nature of which she considers

herself to be a part. She has noticed erratic weather with an increased frequency of flash floods and landslides.

Tso Rolpa is directly upstream from Donggang, but the lack of alternatives and fatalism has helped her put climate change at the back of her mind and carry on with her daily life.

"No one knows when the lake will burst, so we cannot stop our daily chores. Let fate decide," Janmu Sherpa tells us.

This diverse narrative among Nepalis means that the government faces the complexity of turning public awareness into climate action while trying to reduce poverty, marginalisation of women, state neglect of indigenous communities, racial discrimination and out-migration.

These socio-economic issues overlap, and policymakers are faced with the difficult task of identifying and implementing policy that prioritise climate adaptation alongside raising the livelihoods of mountain communities.

Up here in the Rolwaling, one thing is clear: the focus of research must shift to human-centric solutions, one that brings

scientists, mountain communities, transient visitors, the government and activists together. Indigenous mountain communities are well placed to observe changes and flood events, but they are often unaware of the predicted consequences.

Subsistence living, the inability to comprehend complex scientific studies, weak government institutions rampant with corruption, and traditional beliefs make matters worse. Hence the hoax theory.

Engaging local residents as citizen scientists who can contribute to data collection and documentation would be a step. Micro-insurance schemes are a great tool in protecting low-income communities against risks of climate change in exchange for a regular payment of premiums proportion to the likelihood and cost of the relevant risk.

The mountains are melting before our eyes. People living here are unable to stop it, they can only adapt to the changes. Some do it by putting it out of their minds and plodding along in forced denial. Others think the climate crisis is a conspiracy.

While the long-term impacts of climate change are widely understood among many residents of Nepal, it means very little to people who struggle to live in this harsh environment. 🇳🇵

Rastraraj Bhandari is pursuing a Masters in Economics and China Studies at the Yenching Academy of Peking University in Beijing.

partners constructed a 70m canal that lowered the water level of the lake by 3m. Scientists believed the water level needed to be lowered by 20m to mitigate the risk of a GLOF, but this was better than nothing.

The resulting decrease in pressure on the terminal moraine is probably why Tso Rolpa did not burst during the 12 May 2015 aftershock which was epicentred just 10km away. Nonetheless, the

China

announced that this year's pivotal climate negotiation (COP26) in Glasgow will be postponed until next year. This may actually give governments time to reflect and scaleup climate ambitions depending on the commitments of the next US president.

COVID-19

Despite evidence suggesting that China is taking a step backward in its green policies, there is some optimism after remarks by President Xi on his visit to Yucun, a village in Anji county of Zhejiang province on Monday. "The environment itself means the economy. If you protect the environment, you will receive environmental rewards," Xi said.

With top-level commitment still seeming to be intact, it is important for commentators to wait until China finalises its next five-year plan later this year before coming to any conclusions on the future of its growth policy. It will be critical for China to draft economic and social policies with green finance and climate action at their core.

China needs to lead by example. It is imperative for the much-anticipated National Emission Trading Scheme (ETS) to be rolled out on time in 2020, enhance its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), and green the Belt and Road Initiative.

As host of the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in Kunming in October, China also has the opportunity to expand its recent national ban on wildlife trade and consumption into a worldwide ban.

Although the COVID-19 epidemic itself might not be directly linked to climate change, this ban suggests that China acknowledges the integral connection of human, animal and ecosystem health.

Humanitarian needs are presently the priority for the world. Nonetheless, the climate crisis also needs to be urgently addressed, as its consequences will have far greater impact on our ecology, economy and society into the future.

How China pursues the revival of its economy in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic will be closely watched. This is a unique leadership opportunity for China to foster innovative policymaking centered around climate action that will be an example for other countries to follow. 🇳🇵

Rastraraj Bhandari

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Nepal's prisons need to be depopulated

Prabhas Pokharel

Even before the current coronavirus scare, Nepal's overcrowded prisons were hotbeds for infectious diseases like tuberculosis, typhoid and influenza. But public health experts fear that the ease of spread of COVID-19 through breathing and touch could make Nepal's jails incubators for the virus.

There have been many studies of crowded living conditions, hygiene and violence in Nepal's prisons, and a coronavirus outbreak there could affect the health of detainees, security staff and through them spread to the general population.

"Our prison infrastructure is not properly managed, as a result inmates have to be kept in crammed up places," admits Sharmila Kumari Sharma, Senior Auxiliary Health Worker at Dilli Bazar prison. "We have regular awareness programs on washing hands and maintaining physical separation, but implementation is difficult. It is so crowded here that even maintaining 1.5m distance is not possible."

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has published guidelines for preventing and managing the cases of COVID-19 in prisons and detention centres. According to the latest report of the Department of Prison Management (DOPM), there are 24,512 prisoners in Nepal's jails -- 1,528 of them women, 1,281 foreigners and 91 are dependents. There are 8 juvenile correction centers in Nepal with 847 boys and 23 girls.

"Given that COVID-19 thrives on social contact, having crowded jails with people coming in and out is likely to promote transmission into jails, transmission within jails and 'spillover' of infections out of the jails into the community," says Columbia University epidemiology professor Barun Mathema in an email interview with *Nepali Times* this week. Even within jails and detention centers it is important to identify

the medically vulnerable people, those with chronic conditions like HIV/AIDS respiratory illnesses and cancer. Individuals with these co-morbid conditions may be predisposed to poor COVID-19 clinical outcomes.

Studies have shown that reducing the number of inmates would lessen the pressure on prisons. Releasing medically vulnerable, nonviolent offenders and people towards the end of their sentence could free up some space in the prisons, and would help in general mitigation goal of slowing the spread of the

vulnerable.

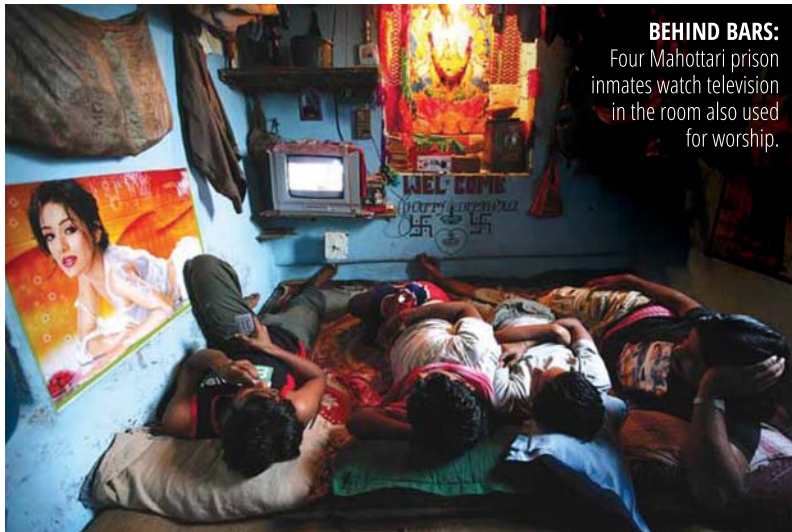
The Office of Attorney General (OAG) worked on the provisions to reduce the number of prisoners and inmates in juvenile detention centers. Depending on the gravitas of the crime, the concerned authority and the police may release a person from custody. Legally, if the police or adjudicating authority decides it is not necessary to keep a person in detention during the course of an investigation, they may release them on guarantee or bail or recognisance to appear on the given date.

Says advocate Rabintra Bhattarai: "It is possible to reduce the number of prisoners in Nepal by one-third from 22,000 to about 7,000, this would make prison management and budget easier, as well as reduce the risk of a coronavirus spread."

The Supreme Court responded positively to a move by Attorney General Agni Kharel to release 13 elderly prisoners in Nepal's jails and sent the file to the Home Ministry, among them the French-Vietnamese serial killer Charles Shobraj. The Court also decided to exercise the power of case diversion in accordance with the Act Relating to Children-2018 so that juvenile delinquents can be released on recognisance to appear when called by the court on the guarantee of their parent/guardian.

"It is up to the Home Ministry to make the final decision, but we are sending the list of elderly inmates to them," said the director general of the Jail Administration Department, Pradip Raj Kandel.

The decision to pardon or suspend the jail sentence by the OAG is a win-win situation, legal experts say. It would reduce the load on prison management which would, in turn, minimise the risk of COVID-19. However, many inmates are in the prison because they do not have money to pay for bail, and some are not able to pay the fine. 🇳🇵



KIRAN PANDAY/NEPALI TIMES ARCHIVE

disease if there is an outbreak. In addition, use of bail, speedy trials, early release and community service could aid in resolving the issue of overcrowding in the prisons and unsanitary conditions -- problem that predate COVID-19.

In fact, the DOPM wrote a letter to the Ministry of Home Affairs stating the need for personal protective equipment (PPE), thermal gun, mask, glove, sanitiser and testing kit in prisons and juvenile correction centers. Hospitals in Nepal are in shortage of PPEs and other protective gear, and it seems that for the overstretched government the prison system is the last priority. Unsanitary living conditions in the prisons make the facilities even more

"Prisons can be incubators for COVID-19"

Nepali Times spoke to Barun Mathema, professor of epidemiology at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University in New York about how the COVID-19 pandemic will affect prisons.



Nepali Times: How serious is the danger of coronavirus or other infections spreading out of prisons into the general population?
Barun Mathema: For detainees under trail for longer term sentencing I would say we need to be guided by two principles: 1) as a society we are obligated to protect detainees (in jails or prisons); 2) likewise, we should take actions to reduce risk to the

surrounding communities. There are many bridge populations, i.e. jail staff, detainees and visiting members of the community, for example family, that can transport the virus into or out of the jails.

The criminal justice system should at least consider: i) dropping charges on low-level crimes, ii) relax charging low level offenses in the first place, and 3) release detainees who are the most vulnerable (aging or those with serious co-morbidity). The result will likely help lift some pressure within the jails, reducing the risk of outbreaks and potential spillover into the community.

What is your view on the probable immune-enhancing property of the BCG vaccine?

I work primarily on tuberculosis, anti-microbial resistance in tuberculosis and in other bacterial pathogens.

BCG vaccination is one of the most widely used vaccines in the world. Although role of BCG in preventing TB has been heavily debated over the decades, BCG vaccination is thought to prevent severe forms of childhood TB. BCG induces a potent immune response (in fact reasons why it is also used for Bladder Cancer therapy). It is plausible that BCG may induce protective immune response against viral respiratory pathogens such as SARS-CoV2. If this is the case, we do not know the extent or how long this protective immune response would last. My guess is that it will be short term - which would be great at, for example, protecting health care workers. We would need a properly controlled clinical trials for example randomised clinical trials, to demonstrate benefit of BCG vaccination in protecting against SARS-CoV2 - such a trial is underway.

How did you develop an interest in epidemiology and especially on anti-microbial resistance?

I have always been interested in how things work in the real world. I quickly learned that the real world is quite complex to understand and certainly too simplistic using just one type of lens. Epidemiology, as a discipline, offered a framework to integrate both macro and micro level processes at play and thus was very attractive.

My interest in TB stems from the history of the disease in society, arts, and science. It's a biblical disease and still kills 4,000 people a day. Controlling TB, including in places like Nepal, has been challenging and very humbling.

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