


BIKRAM RAJ



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Unlock the country in phases

Nepal was the first country in the South Asia to clamp a stay-at-home order on 24 March, after only the second confirmed case. It was a bold move, sacrificing the economy to save lives.

That proactive decision to enforce a nationwide lockdown bought us time to prepare for possible outbreaks, and to prevent a peak. It worked well, and the government deserves credit for daring to take the step. Nepal has a relatively low number of confirmed cases, and no reported deaths so far.

However, public health experts interviewed for this editorial tell us there is no way of knowing what the real extent of infection is. They are certain that COVID-19 has killed people in Nepal, but they may have died at home because of stigma if they went to hospital, or they succumbed to co-morbidities like tuberculosis or pre-existing pneumonia.



DIWAKAR CHETTRI

The detection of clusters of 16 new cases in Nepalganj and 17 people in one family in Parsa this week brought the total number of cases to 99. This number is sure to rise for the simple reason that there is not enough testing being done. The new cases were mostly asymptomatic, and only came about because of contact tracing a cohort at risk.

As has been said, the lockdown was a balance between saving lives and saving livelihoods. But now after 6 weeks, it is a balance between saving lives, and saving lives. Whose lives are we going to save? We have to protect the general population from the coronavirus as well as save it from poverty, hunger and disease.

Wednesday's Cabinet decision to relax some restrictions and kickstart the economy, while welcome, lacks clarity. The provisions are vague, it is not clear what is allowed and what is not, and who will monitor the rules on distancing and conduct of the factories, offices and industries that open. For example, will manufacturing units in hot spots like Nepalganj or Udaypur be allowed to operate or not? Why are the red zones not designated? At times like these rules have to be absolutely clear leaving no ambiguity so they can be enforced.

Still, this is better than continuing with a blanket nationwide lockdown. Joblessness, indebtedness and bankruptcies are already

costing lives with a spike in suicides. There have been measles outbreaks because vaccination campaigns had to be postponed, dialysis patients have died because of lack of treatment, and patients with chronic diseases have run out of life-saving medicines. More people are dying of causes other than the coronavirus.

In a best-case scenario, the lockdown period should have been used for a massive campaign for testing. But in Nepal and other developing countries we do not live in an ideal world. In fact, even industrialised countries face a severe shortage of test kits.

But despite limited testing, we have more or less nailed down the places with high risk. These are districts on the Indian border, where despite the lockdown there has been movement of people. There are probably infections among the many thousands of migrant workers who have dispersed across the mountains of western Nepal. These areas should still be under lockdown, but Wednesday's Cabinet is unclear about that.

Other parts of Nepal which have not reported any new cases in the last six weeks despite testing can be gradually opened with precautions. Most of those who tested PCR positive have relatively mild symptoms. Hospital records across the country show no discernible spike in deaths from influenza-like causes.

India has extended its lockdown till 18 May, but has divided the country into red, amber and green districts. In the absence of widespread testing, for Nepal to have similar designation would be arbitrary. But like India, Nepal's government should have also been as specific as possible with its new guidelines.

Even as the Ministry of Health and Population in Kathmandu was briefing the media on Monday about the new coronavirus cases in Nepalganj via Facebook live, two children had died of measles in Dhading. Throughout this crisis, the number of children felled by preventable infections has not gone down – in fact there is evidence it may be increasing.

Over 30,000 kidney patients in Nepal are at risk because the COVID-19 lockdown is preventing them from travelling to hospitals for regular dialysis. Some have died as a result. Other patients suffering from chronic diseases are not getting vital medicines. Ironically, a nationwide quarantine aimed at controlling one disease is causing deaths from other.

The best possible solution going ahead, experts say, is to continue COVID-19 testing, identifying hotspots and isolating them, designating low, medium and high-risk areas, gradually lifting restrictions while taking precautions, and being on the lookout for flareups so they can be immediately contained.

Since testing everyone is impossible, and continuing with a complete clampdown would be much more damaging, of the next best option is a partial lifting of the restrictions.

Announce a carefully calibrated sectoral and geographical easing of the rules

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

In the issue #501 of *Nepali Times*, 10 years ago, Sujeev Shakya wrote in his *Artha Been* column titled 'Rs 15,000,000,000', which hovered around the amount of loss the country concurred due to Maoists parties and the political instability that caused numerous *bandas* over the years. Not much seems to have changed. Excerpt:

Every day of the Maoist strike the country loses Rs 3 billion (\$40 million). Since Sunday we have lost Rs 15 billion (\$200 million).

Bandas are the most tried and tested way to express political power in Nepal. All political entities here have used them at one time or another. Post-1990, parties have groomed students and workers to enforce their strikes.

Ruling political parties aren't even trying to thwart the current *banda*: perhaps they fancy using this priceless tool when they themselves are in opposition.



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ONLINE PACKAGES



CALL TO PRAYER

This year's Ramadan feels empty to Muslims everywhere. For the first time since 1982, Sous chef of Kashmiri Masjid, Mohammed Israil is at home preparing Iftaar for his family instead of a hearty meal for 300 people at the mosque. Watch how the Israil family celebrate the festival despite the lockdown. Story: page 5.

NIJGAD AND EIAs

Nijgad international airport project is senselessness and now it has been proven ('Pandemic impact on aviation may kill Nijgad', Sonia Awale, page 8).

Bhaskar Dhungana

■ If the airport gets built, it will be the biggest 'White Elephant' in Nepal, even worse than buying wide-bodied jets! What was the thinking behind it? Possibly vested interests. Not to mention the destruction of some of Nepal's wonderful forests.

Alan Roadnight

■ Well-structured factual article.

Kishor Chandra Gautam

■ Environmental assessment has just been a formality everywhere ('Nepal's Environment Impact non-Assessments', Yadav Ghimirey, page 8). We are seeing the consequences on daily basis in so many forms today: pollution, degrading biodiversity, deforestation, drying of natural springs.

Ramesh Shrestha

■ Major flaws and deficiencies exist in the current system. We don't have sufficient capacity and human resource to conduct and also approve EIAs. We need environmental specialist with 'integrated' background and expertise to approve EIAs, not some forester. There is lack of incentives to enforce monitoring and compliance.

Nilu P. Basnyat

■ Shocking incompetence driven by greed.

Sangeeta Thapa

■ And it seems no one approving these projects cares. Shame on those who did these assessments.

Kalps Para

UNLOCK THE LOCKDOWN

I agree lockdown is not a solution ('Unlock the country in phases', Editorial, page 2). It just provides time to think about the strategies to come up against this pandemic and implement them. Our strategy is to push for the date of the peak rather than flattening the curve. What can we expect from these clowns?

SanDesh Gurung

■ We should be stricter about lockdowns. If it is eased, it will worsen the situation. Cooked meals should be delivered directly to home of those who can't afford it. It is wiser and safer to stay at home.

Rajiv Shrestha

■ Our government is only following the easier path, not necessarily the correct one. They can't understand the plight of the common people, because they don't have to suffer, have money, power and passes to go anywhere.

Keshav Mangal Joshi

AGRICULTURE AND HEALTH

Their hard work doesn't generate them profit. The government should subsidise tax on agriculture related commodities ('Pandemic offers chance to revive farming', Krishna Paudel, nepalitimes.com).

Tsultrim Tenphel

■ Nepal is no country for the sick or the old or the disabled or the poor ('Kidney patients dying due to COVID-19 lockdown', S Dhiran, page 9). It is a paradise for a handful.

Manohar Budhathoki

SMALLPOX CHRONICLES

I remember well all the terribly scarred smallpox survivors from my initial years in Nepal, 1969-71 ('Big story of small pox in Nepal', Tom Robertson, #1008).

Charles Uphaus

■ These are extremely well written and so enlightening ('How Nepal eradicated the smallpox virus', Tom Robertson, nepalitimes.com).

Daniel Lak

WHAT'S TRENDING

Kidney patients dying due to COVID-19 lockdown

by S Dhiren

A nationwide quarantine aimed at controlling one disease is causing deaths from another as the COVID-19 lockdown prevents kidney patients in Nepal from travelling to hospitals for dialysis and medical supplies. Visit nepalitimes for full story.



Most reached and shared on Facebook



Big story of small pox in Nepal

by Tom Robertson

Viruses somewhat similar to the COVID-19 have touched the lives of countless Nepalis, and shaped larger events in many unexpected ways. The first four instalments of the series 'History of Disease' by Tom Robertson have been best-read stories in the past 2 weeks.



Most popular on Twitter

Nepal's Environment Impact non-Assessments

by Yadav Ghimirey

Mandatory environmental impact assessment reports are mistakes-ridden and just a formality in Nepal's infrastructure projects. This discerning analysis raised questions and many readers sent in comments. Go online and join the discussion.



Most commented

Nepalis in Kuwait apply to return home

by Upasana Khadka

More than 2,500 undocumented workers in Kuwait are taking up an offer for amnesty and flights home amidst the COVID-19 pandemic scare, but is Nepal ready to take them back? Check out our website for the full story and new developments.



Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
#Lockdown was a balance between saving lives & saving livelihoods. But after 6 weeks, we have to protect the general population also from poverty, hunger & disease. It's time for a carefully calibrated sectoral & geographical easing of the rules.



Ghana S. Gurung @ghanagrg
Time to focus on various controlling measures while keeping basic livelihood & economic functions on before too late



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
The Environmental Impact Assessment of the Sagu Khola Hydroelectric Project in Dolakha states that a Fishing Cat was sighted during the field survey. This would have been brilliant news if it was true. A critical look into EIAs of #Nepal's mega projects.



Mahendra Suwal @suwal_mahen
Consultants should be blacklisted if there are strong evidences of copying and pasting done in reports. It's against the law. And discourage such activities in future.



Sri Lanka Global @srilankaglobal
Faked EIA data (Environmental Impact Assessment) used in Nepal to push to multi billion dollar dam mega-projects funded by Development Banks and promoted by AID agencies. Use of fake data and fudged numbers is a common problem worldwide.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
5 people have been arrested for killing musk deer inside Sagarmatha National Park using COVID-19 lockdown period. 6 musk deer were found dead earlier this week in one of the worst cases of wildlife poaching in the reserve below Mt Everest in recent years.



Ajay Narayan Sharma @AjayTilasi
The lack of strict implementation of existing laws is one of the reasons; rather a motivation for wildlife poaching in Nepal. Cases should be taken more seriously and poachers should be heavily punished. #lawandorder #wildlife



MONIKA DEUPALA

Nepal's future normal

Nepalis have come up with ways to cope with the COVID-19 because we are inherently laid back

Who would have thought that a time would come when the price of oil would be below zero, once mighty countries would crumble, and humankind would be brought to its knees? And all because of a microscopic strand of RNA.



1/2 FULL
Anil Chitrakar

The contagion has provided individuals, communities, countries and the world a chance to mend our ways, to live more frugally and sustainably, to be humble about our inventions and gadgets, and realise how ephemeral our preoccupations are in the eternity that is nature.

We naturally appreciate doctors and nurses knowing that we may have to see them some day, but we need farmers to grow our food in all seasons. One way to change after this crisis would be to bless our grandchildren to become farmers. Not just engineers and doctors. The other way to transform ourselves and the nation would be to go back to the village and change our attitude towards the land and natural resources.

There is cash in the city, but not much else. This crisis has woken up urban consumers to the fact that there are producers of food and essentials in a supply chain that they took for granted. The cheese for the pizza that was home delivered came from Jiri or Langtang or even Gujarat's Amul cooperative. The walnut is from Jumla, the large beans from Khumbu, the mutton is from the hills, and rice from the Tarai.

This pandemic gives us a chance to identify where the supply chain is weak and what we need to do to secure them for the future. Not just for a future crisis, but for a future normal. Where is food we consume grown? How do we pay for its import? What is the real cost of producing it? Where are the warehouses, the cold stores, aggregation, processing plants, and management of wholesale markets? Who are the 'middle men' who control the supply and prices?

The world is now learning from people like Kamal Tuladhar that Newa traders who went to Lhasa 150 years ago had to be quarantined for 14 days upon their return to Kathmandu because of the diseases that they might have brought back. Our ancestors survived famines and knew the value of sun dried and

fermented food for difficult times. *Gundruk, sinki, churpi, achar, tama*, lentils and beans were literally life savers during food shortages following epidemics. We need to protect these recipes, and the processes to make them. Food does not grow in a supermarket. Milk does not come out of a carton. Chicken does not live in a freezer.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has become wildly popular for daily press show where he mixes his warnings with hope. He appeals to people to take this opportunity to re-imagine the

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future. This applies as much to New Yorkers as to Nepalis: every crisis provides us a chance to do things differently. At least one member of the family henceforth should be a farmer. Or a barber.

The butcher, the grocery store keeper, the dairy and bakery have all become mini-Amazons overnight, doing home delivery. This resilience in the Nepali is what makes us confident about the future. Classes on Zoom, homework and grades online, and

even virtual heritage tours have become normal in just one month. If we can bridge the bandwidth divide of mobile telephony so the digital economy is accessible and affordable, we can leapfrog into a future normal.

Once again, missing in this future is government. Yes, we get electricity and (occasionally) water, but little else. The way the government distributed relief to the needy was a farce, no one believes the numbers they claim to have served. Volunteer groups did a much better job. The way the district administration gave out passes for 'essential service providers' and emergencies is a joke.

The opening of supermarkets while arresting the neighbourhood Mom and Pop store owners has once again reminded Nepalis that some are still more equal than others. After all these years of 'capacity building' the government has only built its capacity for kickbacks, and increased dependency on outsiders. It bungled procurement on test kits and equipment, ordered the wrong kind of kits and colluded with businessmen to inflate the cost.

Once more, citizens rose to the rescue by improvising PPEs

in Nepal from plastic sheets and transparencies. But just count the number of ICU beds in the country, minus the number of politicians and you can decide for yourself why you need to self isolate.

A theory says that if you want an easy solution to problems, find a lazy person for the job. It makes sense: work from home, online orders, online payments — they all look like innovations that have been invented by the lazy for the lazy. It could be that Nepalis have come up with ways to cope with the COVID-19 because we are inherently laid back. If that is the case we will survive the post-pandemic world as well.

Introverts have flourished in the age of physical distancing, artists, writers, poets, chefs have been spending the most creative weeks of their lives. Cooking, baking, design work will all thrive in the future normal. The fact that we all wear masks means we do not need to smile at anyone we do not want to, and thank goodness those messy handshakes and awkward hugs are a thing of the past.

And, oh yes, the rains have come. Happy farming. 🇳🇵

Anil Chitrakar writes this fortnightly column 1/2 Full in Nepali Times, and is President of Siddharthinc



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The strangest Anzac Day ever

Marking the WWI anniversary in Kathmandu through earthquakes and lockdowns

Under a gunmetal grey sky, the four of us stood for the Last Post on an expansive empty lawn as the crows wheeled overhead. The Nepal Army general and British Gurkha colonel saluted smartly in their uniforms, whilst the Ambassador and I bowed our heads. The red poppies in all our lapels symbolised remembrance and acknowledgment of the ultimate sacrifice by all men and women in the armed forces during times of conflict.



SO FAR SO GOOD
Lisa Choegyal

It must have been the strangest Anzac Day commemoration ever. The grass, still soggy from yesterday's rain, was dotted with crimson rose petals fallen from the luscious red wreathes. In turn we had laid them between the two flags, on the anniversary of the First World War Gallipoli landing by the ANZACs (Australia and New Zealand Army Corps), in remembrance of the dreadful battlefield losses that ensued on both sides and from so many nations. After the one minute silence in the deserted garden, the Reveille was trumpeted on an embassy iPhone.

Since services began on 25 April 1916, this year 2020 was the first Anzac Day ever that Australians and New Zealanders were not able to gather nationwide to mark the anniversary, due to the social isolation battle against COVID-19. Instead, digitally shared messages urged individual calls to action — messages of solidarity displayed in home windows, the laying of virtual poppies at the online cenotaph, and alone standing at dawn in driveways, gates and front doors to mark the moment #standatdawn.

Every year the Australian Embassy hosts our Anzac Day



JAMES HAZELL

MEMORIAL DAY: Australian Ambassador Peter Budd, Lt-Gen Sarad Kumar Giri, Chief of General Staff, Nepal Army, Col Richard Goodman MBE, Commander, British Gurkhas Nepal and Lisa Choegyal, Honorary Consul of New Zealand at the Anzac Day service on 25 April 2020 during the lockdown in Kathmandu.

service in Kathmandu, echoing solemn sunrise ceremonies all over Australia and New Zealand, with many young people as well as old brought together to mark this most important joint national occasion. Normally the garden is thronged with several hundred Australians, New Zealanders, Nepalis and the international community, enlivened by Nepali and Gurkha buglers and bagpipers, and followed by a slap-up Aussie breakfast that is part of the attraction.

Last year as well as long term residents and tourists, several mountaineers joined us including Guy Cotter, Robert Mads Anderson and a couple of Sir Edmund Hillary's grandchildren — Russell Brice was absent, recovering from his fall from a rooftop restaurant. This year there are no expeditions and the mountains are closed to trekkers. Ambassador Pete and Emma boiled the kettle for coffee

COVID-19

and offered us homemade Anzac biscuits in their empty house.

I'm not sure when the Australian-hosted Anzac Day tradition began in Nepal, but it must have been around 1990 when the embassy moved to its current compound in Bansbari. Elizabeth Hawley regularly attended as New Zealand Honorary Consul before me. With no compunction she admitted to having delivered the exact same Anzac address every year, claiming no one ever noticed.

Although diplomatic relations between Nepal and Australia have existed since 1960, it was ambassador Diane Johnstone, affectionately known as 'Call-me-Di', who set up in Kathmandu from a cosy rented house in Thapathali

in 1986 with a guitar-playing husband. The succession of early incumbents in the representational role were marked by life-changing events during their tenure — separation, divorce, engagement and marriage — including one emotional liaison with a Bollywood superstar that ended in tears. Over the decades, the mission has achieved many milestones in humanitarian and development aid, technical assistance and trade support.

The popularity of Australian wine in Kathmandu dates back to one inspired ambassador who offered to import cases for his diplomatic friends — and before the days of wine being available in the open market, he had many friends. Eventually both governments noticed when the embassy wine order exceeded that of much larger missions in London and Paris, dryly pointing out that every official Australian in Nepal must have

been consuming about three dozen bottles a day. Aussie producers had the last laugh however, with their brands still established today as Nepal's wine of choice amongst the chatterati.

We wanted to do something special to commemorate the 100-year anniversary of Gallipoli on 25 April 2015. Thousands were gathering in Turkey, including the Prince of Wales and a ministerial delegation from Nepal. The UK had observed the outbreak of World War I with a dramatic moat-ful of 888,246 ceramic poppies around the Tower of London, representing all British and Commonwealth fatalities.

Hoping to achieve a similarly grand gesture, the Gurkha commander conspired with us to ship 120,000 poppies from the British Legion in London, the idea being to carpet the grounds of the Australian ambassador's home with a sea of scarlet. Each paper poppy raises at least a pound each but, thanks to British Gurkha generosity and skilled negotiations, boxes of poppies were delivered to the Australians with the Kiwi consulate paying only a nominal amount. At the last minute, however, the ambassador's wife vetoed the idea on the grounds that it would be hard to tidy up afterwards and make a mess of her garden.

The surfeit of poppies, plenty for future events, was soon erased from minds on that unforgettable 25 April five years ago. I had just returned home to Budanilkantha, kicked off my shoes and settled on the terrace with my laptop and the dogs when at 11:56 am the earthquake struck. Terracotta tiles rained off the roof, my car careened violently beneath the magnolia tree, and in the distance far below a pall of dust rose eerily above the assaulted city.

No doubt, we all remember exactly where we were and how we felt at that fateful moment on Anzac Day 2015, when our lives were rocked forever. 🇳🇵



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Nepal's Muslims face stigma after COVID-19 tests

Members of the minority bear ostracisation after contact tracing shows spread in the community

Alisha Sijapati

Ashraf Shah looked forlorn as he knelt in prayer inside the deserted Kashmiri Masjid in the centre of Kathmandu this week. The mosque would have been crowded and noisy during the holy month of Ramadan. But today, the only sound was the *azaan* prayer recited five times a day, which echoed through the empty chamber.

Since Nepal's strict nationwide lockdown went into effect on 24 March, the country has tested 99 people with COVID-19. Since many of them are from the Muslim community, the religious minority has been singled out for contact tracing especially in Nepalganj, Birganj, Rautahat and Udaypur where the cases were detected.

Ashraf is lost for words. "What a world are we living in now," he says, looking skyward.

Ramadan has always meant a time of joyous celebration with friends and family, the coming together in the evenings to break fast. This year, there is anxiety and fear among Nepal's Muslims because of fears that they will be blamed for the virus. Since many Nepalis watch Hindi tv channels, some of the stigmatisation is due to the Indian media scapegoating Muslims for the spread of the virus there.

"Muslims in Nepal are a minority and have peacefully coexisted without any conflict for centuries, but now I dread the future, and the rise of xenophobia and intolerance spreading from across the border," says Abdul Shamim, head of Nepal Jame Masjid.

In early April, 13 men from the Tablighi Jamaat living in a mosque in Udayapur tested positive for coronavirus, and 11 of them were



PHOTOS: MONIKA DEUPALA

Indian nationals who had come for religious instruction. The district has been virtually sealed off since then, and there has been contact tracing of people who they had been in close proximity with them.

Najbul Nilam Khan, a rights activist in Udayapur, is worried. Although a majority of those who tested positive were Indians, locals have virtually ostracised the Muslim community there, she says.

"They try to avoid conversation and just look the other way when they see us passing by on the road, neighbours avoid any sort of conversation with us even from distance. Sometimes eyes speak

louder than words," she told us on the phone.

While world has been hit hard by the global pandemic, in India and Nepal it is mainly the Muslims in particular who find themselves bearing the stigma – largely because of the social media and tv networks stereotyping them. During such a crisis, Ramadan would have been a time for solidarity and bringing the community together, but even that is not possible because of the lockdown.

"We work hard and save money for 11 months so that we can lay out the best meals for ourselves for Ramadan," says Shamim, who blames coverage of the 'Corona bomb' on

Indian TV for the stigma. The leaked Indian security memo naming Nepali national Jalim Mukhia for being involved in a conspiracy to infiltrate coronavirus-infected individuals to spread the pandemic in India was widely broadcast on Indian tv channels.

The stereotyping has spread faster than the virus itself to Kathmandu Valley. Last month, social media posts cited 13 Indonesians who were to travel to Saptari for a religious assembly being moved from a mosque in Imadol to Godavari for quarantine. When locals found out, they came out to oppose it.

"There are facts and there are

rumours. Spreading misinformation stigmatises entire communities, making the world even more miserable than it is already," Shamim says.

After the Udayapur and Birganj outbreaks, police and other health officials searched the premises of the Kashmiri Masjid in Kathmandu, and nine mosque employees had

COVID-19

Rapid Diagnostic Tests. They were all negative. But the fear among Muslims heightened this week after nine among 60 at a mosque in Nepalganj tested PCR positive.

Says Abdul Shamim, head of Nepal Jame Masjid: "After these cases, whenever there is news of confirmed cases going up, people are always asking were they Muslims? Were they caught in a mosque? The media highlights Muslim positives, they never says a Hindu or a Christian tested positive." 🇳🇵

CALL TO PRAYER



This year's Ramadan feels empty to Muslims everywhere. For the first time since 1982, Sous chef of Kashmiri Masjid, Mohammed Israil is at home preparing Iftaar for his family instead of a hearty meal for 300 people at the mosque. Watch how the Israil family celebrate the festival despite the lockdown.

nepalitimes.com

Smaller, quieter meals



Thamel with his family. Like others from his community, Israil says he is abiding by the government's strict lockdown rules which he says is also a religious act which will make Allah happy.

"I love cooking meals for people, I think it's a blessing to feed those who need food more than us," says Israil, who recalls preparing *rumali roti*, *chana*, *keema samosa*, *aalu keema*, *pakoda*, fruits and *firni*, a dish made of sweet rice.

For the first time in four decades, Israil is at home this month, confined to a small kitchen cooking with tiny utensils on much smaller pans, in comparison to those at the mosque. He says: "I am accustomed to cooking in a big kitchen with big utensils, these look like miniatures."

Ramadan is not the same for 64-year-old Mohammed Israil this year, who has been volunteering as a head chef during the month-long festival in the Kashmiri Masjid since 1982, preparing meals for more than 300 people every day during Ramadan.

This time Israil is confined to his home in

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VIRTUAL EVENTS



Sunday Sessions

In this fortnightly talk series, readers and writers from various walks join journalist Prateebha Tuladhar in conversations about reading, writing, expression, and meaningful communication. The first guest is writer and journalist Paavan Mathema. Tune in to the livestream on Zoom, Instagram or Youtube. 10 May, 3pm

Books Beyond Borders

'Books Beyond Borders' will kick off its next book reading, Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. Join facilitators and other book lovers from around South Asia in sharing your thoughts via Google Classroom. Go to Quixote's Cafe's Facebook Page and book your slot by 8 May.

Coffee queries

A way virtually to connect with entrepreneurs coming together to share their experiences, expectations and energies together in response to the ongoing pandemic. Join every Monday morning. 11 May, 9am-11am

Photography contest

Be a part of the 'Hami Nepali' photography contest and send in photos of a place, people, or things that represent your surrounding to Pangolin Travels. For details, visit their Facebook page.



Astronomy webinar

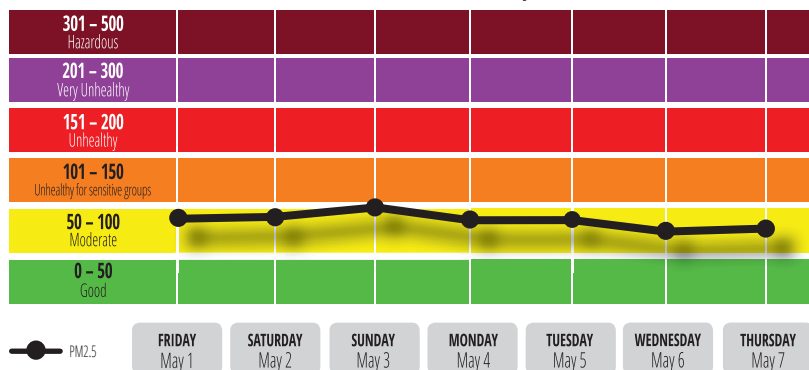
Organised by the Nepal Astronomical Society, architect and amateur astronomer Debesh Rai will share his experiences about astronomy in Nepal. Register for the meeting on Facebook. 12 May, 5pm



The Central Himalaya is being battered by one trough after another, bringing unusually heavy precipitation for this time of year. Pre-monsoon squalls of the past two weeks is expected to continue into the weekend with a pattern of clear mornings and afternoon build-up with thunderstorms. The maximum temperature has also been 5 degrees below average, but will start rising into the mid-20s next week.

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 1 - 7 May



Since the government's announcement on a nationwide lockdown on 24 March, Kathmandu's air quality index (AQI) improved significantly, except when there were wildfires in late March. With the heavy rainfall for the past few weeks, the daily average dipped below 70 and sometimes even lower after a shower. For hourly live AQI measurements, go to www.nepalitimes.com, and enjoy breathing clean air as long as it lasts.

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

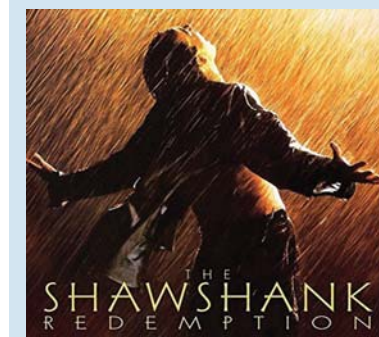
ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI



Upcycling is the art of reusing discarded or unwanted materials to create something of higher quality or value. This kind of creative reuse has a big environmental, social and personal benefit. Upcycling reduces waste, reduces the need for raw materials and is also a fulfilling creative pursuit. Bottles, clothes and furniture are just some of the things you can upcycle to create a unique one-of-a-kind object.

OUR PICK



Based on Stephen King's 1982 novella *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*, the 1994 drama *The Shawshank Redemption* tells the story of a convicted murderer trying to prove his innocence. Tim Robbins plays Andy Dufresne, a banker who is sentenced to life in Shawshank State Penitentiary for the murders of his wife and her lover. Directed by Frank Darabont, the movie also stars Morgan Freeman as a fellow prison mate of Dufresne. The award-winning drama might just be the perfect film to indulge in this rainy weekend.

ONLINE ARCHIVES



हेर्ने कथा

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.



One World Theatre

A few One World's plays are now on their YouTube channel. Watch their play *The Flight* and its adaptation of the Russian play *Three Sisters*. 29 May onwards



The world at home

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Global film festival

20 film festivals have joined together to stream movies free on YouTube as the 'We Are One: A Global Film Festival'. Featuring content curated by the Berlin, Cannes, Venice, Sundance, Toronto and Tribeca film festivals, among others. 29 May onwards



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Nepal grapples with bringing workers home

Government needs to be better prepared for the expected influx of thousands of its workers from the Gulf and Malaysia



Upasana Khadka

On 5 May, migrant workers appeared at the gates of the Nepal Embassy in Abu Dhabi even before office hours. The Emirates Cab Company in Sharjah had cancelled their contracts, and they had traveled 180km to seek help.

The UAE-based Nepal Association (NRNA) is helping, but the workers are crammed into one apartment waiting to be sent home. Naresh Sen from the NRNA says the workers are being looked after until they are repatriated, but he added: "We will have to think about who will bear the cost of their return tickets once they are allowed to travel back."

On Tuesday, the Embassy booked a bus to take the workers back to Sharjah. One of them has even posted a letter from the Embassy assuring them of priority in future repatriation flights as his profile picture on Facebook, and says: "The letter has at least boosted our morale."

Back in Kathmandu, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Labour Ministry have assured Nepalis stranded abroad that a repatriation strategy is being planned, but there are no details. Embassies have started collecting data of those who wish to return from the Gulf and Malaysia. The government has extended the ban on international flights till 31 May.

The Foreign Employment Board estimates that over 120,000 workers from the Gulf and Malaysia will need to be repatriated immediately.

due to job loss, contract completion, because they are part of amnesty programs.


There are 3,500 undocumented Nepali workers who have taken up an amnesty and free repatriation offer from the Kuwait government, and they are waiting in packed makeshift dorms. In the UAE 10,000 Nepalis have signed up with the Nepal Embassy in just the past week to return. For the Nepal government, prioritising countries from where to repatriate workers first and selecting the 'most vulnerable' among them is not going to be easy.

There are also questions about whether the returnees will be quarantined in Kathmandu after they arrive, or in their home municipalities. Nepal is already facing a shortage of test kits owing to delays in procurement. Experience has shown workers may also have to deal with stigmatisation when they get home.

The Philippines had started repatriating 2,000 of its workers daily, but on 3 May it had to cancel pre-scheduled flights for a week after running out of 14 day quarantine space in Manila. Pakistan has begun repatriating 7,500 citizens a week, but is also constrained by quarantine capacity. There are 100,000 Pakistanis stranded across 88 countries and 15,000 have been repatriated so far. Last week, 105 out of the 209 passengers in an Etihad Airways flight from Abu Dhabi to Islamabad tested positive for the virus.

India is starting repatriation flights on Thursday for its

nationals from 12 countries including, the Gulf, Malaysia and the United States, and is also using naval ships to bring them home. The plan is to bring back up to 2,500 workers a day to 10 airports in India where they will be quarantined for 14 days.

For the time being, Nepal will have to ask governments to take care of its workers before it can bring them back. The government could redirect a part of its COVID-19 response budget to Nepal's embassies to address the needs of the stranded migrant workers. Otherwise it may have a humanitarian disaster in its hands. 

Not everyone wants to return

The Nepal government has started registering its migrant workers who want to return home, but there are many who have decided not to go back despite the uncertainties.

Nepal embassies in the UAE and Qatar are registering migrant workers intending to go home, while the embassy in Kuwait has completed the paperwork of 3,500 returning undocumented Nepalis.

Despite the double whammy of the health and economic crises, many of the 1.5 million Nepalis there seem to have decided to ride it out, and hold onto their jobs. “My duty has not been interrupted by the crisis and the lockdown,” said Surya, a Qatar-based Nepali telecom worker.

Om and his security guard brother in Malaysia do not want to return either. "There is no way I can earn Rs70,000 a month in Nepal which is what I make here," said Om, who works in a rubber glove factory.

Rita who works in a resort in the Maldives has decided to stay put. "Tourism is in a crisis but it will resume sooner or later," she says. "There is no guarantee things will be better in Nepal."

Jobs abroad, although precarious, offer a steady flow of remittances that the families back in Nepal rely on even more during the lockdown. Many Nepalis are now in a wait-and-watch mode, and their future depends on how quickly economic activity resumes.

Back in Nepal, there are many who had come home on leave, and cannot get back to their jobs. A Nepali couple who have been in Kuwait for seven years had come home for holidays on 28 February, but have been trapped in Kathmandu since.

"I work in a remittance company and my husband works in Starbucks. We both want to return to our jobs," says the wife. "We are hoping we can go back in the evacuation flights bringing Nepal's back."

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A promotional advertisement for WorldLink 5G. The background is dark blue. At the top right is the WorldLink logo with the tagline 'रिहो भनेको' (Rihio भनेको) above it. The main headline reads 'MOVE INTO THIS NEW YEAR WITH **BLAZING SPEED**'. Below this is a large, stylized '5G' with motion lines and a signal icon. Two banners below the '5G' say 'THE FASTEST' and 'JUST GOT FASTER'. On the left is a white Nokia Dual Band Router. To the right of the router are three icons with text: a rocket for 'Blazing Speed', a play button for 'Uninterrupted Video Streaming', a game controller for 'Lag-Free Gaming', and a signal tower for 'Seamless Connectivity'. At the bottom, contact information is provided: 'For More Information Dial: 9801523050' and 'Email: sales@worldlink.com.np | www.worldlink.com.np | www.facebook.com/wlink.np'.

Pandemic impact on aviation may kill Nijgad

Sonia Awale

How the proposed airport's environmental impact assessment green-washed the real cost of Nepal's mega project

Nepal's proposed new international airport has been mired in controversy ever since it was first proposed three decades ago, but what may finally put the plan to rest is the collapse of the aviation industry due to the global pandemic.

The \$6.7 billion mega project in Nijgad, 75km south of Kathmandu, has been criticised for being an expensive white elephant and for threatening the last remaining tropical forest in the eastern Tarai. But it is the longterm impact of the COVID-19 crisis on tourism and the international airline industry that could kill it once and for all.

"Even before this global pandemic, awareness about climate change was starting to reduce air travel which means the need for huge new airport projects will have to be rethought," says aviation analyst Hemant Arjyal.

On paper, the Nijgad airport is the perfect alternative to the country's only international gateway in Kathmandu, which had reached saturation point long before everything came to a standstill last month.

Congestion on the only runway meant planes spent hours on hold, some having to divert to Indian airports after running out of fuel. Kathmandu's air pollution reduced visibility, and added an extra hazard to an already challenging approach over the mountains.

Proponents of Nijgad airport which include tourism entrepreneurs, airline executives and the politicians said the aeropolis would be a catalyst to propel Nepal's economic growth into the future. They said distance was not an issue because the proposed expressway would cut travel time to Kathmandu to one hour.

They also played down the environmental impact, saying some trees have to be sacrificed for infrastructure development, and cited the 2018 Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report that gave the project a green chit.

However, the veracity of that EIA itself has been questioned because it deliberately played down the impact of the felling of 2.4 million hardwood trees in a jungle that is the habitat of over 500 plants, birds and animal species.



Even before the COVID-19 crisis, the Supreme Court in January issued a stay order on construction of the airport when a group of lawyers filed a public interest litigation citing what they said was a fraudulent EIA. Further hearings have been on hold due to the lockdown.

But more than the environmental concerns, criticism of Nijgad is on economic ground and, even if it is needed, for not exploring alternatives. The project could easily be shifted 9km away to Simara without clear-cutting forests. Another alternative would be Murtiya of Sarlahi district which is 30km to the east of Nijgad and would require clearing only 2,700 hectares of newly-planted eucalyptus. The EIA ignores both alternatives.

A pre-feasibility study in 1997 was shelved because of the Maoist war. In 2008, the government decided to revive the project

under a Build Own Operate and Transfer model, and in 2010 contracted the South Korean firm Landmark International to conduct a feasibility study.

But the company was not paid and its report in 2011 was never made public. Yet in 2016 the government went ahead and contracted a company specialising in hydropower projects to prepare an EIA.

Critics say that EIA is a cut-and-paste job that has bent science to make it sound like there is no alternative to Nijgad. It plays down the destruction of nature, and longterm impact on biodiversity.

"EIAs should be scientific, and must have a cost-benefit analysis and assess inter-generational equity. But the Nijgad EIA is riddled with logical and technical errors and is based on assumptions at best," says Sanjay Adhikari of the group Pro Public that filed the writ at the Supreme Court. "In fact,

it looks like the government signed MoU with the Army even before the EIA was passed. The EIA was just a formality."

The EIA is actually based on a pre-feasibility study conducted over two decades ago, rendering it obsolete. There is evidence that entire paragraphs of the EIA have been plagiarised from the Upper Tama Kosi Hydropower report, and mentions plant and animal species found at high altitudes, and not in the Tarai.

The EIA does admit that the airport at Nijgad will 'cause an imbalance' in biodiversity, but does not mention any mitigation measures.

Clearing the forest will destroy a crucial migration corridor for endangered wild elephants and tigers, deplete the buffer zone of the Parsa Wildlife Reserve, and remove vegetation that recharges groundwater for farms in the Tarai and India. The sound pollution

from aircraft will also disturb wildlife in nearby sanctuaries.

None of this is discussed in any great detail in the EIA. Nor is the fact that two rivulets that flow across the project area become raging torrents in the monsoon.

"The site chosen for the airport has seen a change in weather patterns with tornados, cloudbursts and floods, and the Nijgad project is right in the middle of it all," says activist Shristi Singh Shrestha.

The COVID-19 pandemic has once again reinforced the crucial relationship between the loss of biodiversity, new emerging diseases and the climate emergency.

Elsewhere in the world, large airport expansion projects have been scrapped due to their ecological costs. In fact, questions were raised in the Swiss parliament after Zurich Airport International AG was shortlisted for developing and operating Nijgad.

"From the perspective of climate justice, there are now serious doubts if European countries would allow their aircraft to fly into Nijgad knowing its environmental cost," says Shrestha.

In Nijgad, real estate speculators and squatters have already started clearing the forests in anticipation of the project going through, giving an indication of what the future holds in store for the region. Critics say the government does not care if the airport is feasible, they are only interested in profiting off logging concessions and construction contracts.

The Nijgad International Airport's proposed two runways will accommodate up to 60 million passengers annually – six times more than Kathmandu airport. The airport is based on the hub concept from 20 years ago so airlines can use it as a transit point for passengers moving from various parts of Asia to the rest of the world.

Aviation experts say the hub model is now obsolete and replaced by the point-to-point concept because modern airliners can fly non-stop for 18-20 hours, unlike two decades ago when they needed refuelling stopovers.

Analysts like Arjyal say global aviation will take years to recover from the COVID-19 crisis. But even before the pandemic, flight shaming was already starting to affect the airline business, which raises serious questions about whether Nepal should gamble on such an expensive airport project.

Says advocate Sanjay Adhikari: "This airport is not being built out of necessity, and if it goes ahead despite all these issues, Nijgad will not only destroy the environment but push future generations of Nepalis into debt. The COVID-19 crisis is a chance for us to pull out of this wasteful project now." 🇳🇵

Nepal's Environment Impact non-Assessments

The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report of the proposed Sagu Khola Hydroelectric Project in Dolakha district states that a Fishing Cat was sighted during the field survey. This would have been brilliant news for wildlife enthusiasts if it were true.

The Fishing Cat actually prefers slow moving rivers and stagnant lakes in the Tarai with an abundance of fish, making it highly unlikely for the cat to be living in the mountains of Dolakha.

The West Seti Hydropower Project has been in the works for 20 years, and it never got built. But its EIA states that 140 bird species were observed in the project area in western Nepal, including the endangered yellow-cheeked tit, except it is found specifically in eastern part of the country with no documented sighting ever west of the Arun River.

Nepal's most grandiose infrastructure project Nijgad International Airport's EIA says that the site at 200m above sea level is the habitat for two species of pika *Ochotons* sp and *Naemorhaedus goral* when those are species found in the high mountains.

The EIA also mentions two species of langur found in the project area: common langur and langur monkey with the same scientific name *Presbytis entellus*. Actually this zoological name is not used, and the species is called *Semnopithecus entellus* and is only found in India.



These inconsistencies have put the reliability the Nijgad EIA as well as all other EIAs in Nepal into serious doubt. At this rate, we will be recording snow leopards in the Chitwan and cobra in Tso Rolpa.

In fact, the EIA reports have even gone as far as to record species not found in Nepal at all. The environmental assessment of the Isuwa Cascade Hydropower Project in Sankhuwasabha district in the mountains of northeast Nepal says the project area has pangolins with the scientific name *Salacca zalacca*, which is actually a species of palm tree found in Indonesia.

If we are to believe the EIA report of Solu Dudh Kosi hydropower project, Indian pangolins are found at high altitudes near Mt Everest, when in fact they have been reported only in a few lowland districts.

These mistakes would have been laughable if they were not so serious. They show not just a fundamental deficiency in zoological knowledge, but a reckless disregard for the importance of EIAs in ensuring minimal environmental damage in Nepal's infrastructure projects.

Careful assessments help build a solid base for preventive and mitigation measures. But these glaring errors show that development projects regard them only as a formality with no interest in protecting Nepal's biodiversity. 🇳🇵

Yadav Ghimirey

Kidney patients dying due to the COVID-19 lockdown

A nationwide quarantine aimed at controlling one disease is causing deaths from another

S Dhiren

Over 30,000 kidney patients in Nepal are at risk because the COVID-19 lockdown is preventing them from travelling to hospitals for regular dialysis. Stuck at home, many also are not getting regular supplies of vital medicines for their condition.

Some have died. Nar Bahadur Sunar of Kanchanpur needed regular dialysis, but the lockdown meant he could not travel to hospital because public transport was off the roads. His son in the Indian Army used to send him vital drugs from India, but even that stopped. Sunar died on the day after New Year's on 14 April.

In another village in this district in the plains of far-western Nepal, 24-year-old Anirudra Chaudhary has been getting twice-weekly dialysis at the Seti Zonal Hospital. But because of the lockdown, the dialysis is only performed on Mondays.

This means that Saturdays and Sundays are unbearably painful for Chaudhary as his legs swell, and he struggles to breathe. He has reduced immunity, and is afraid he might catch the coronavirus. His father Ghanashyam cannot bear to see his son suffer. "It is especially difficult to watch him as he struggles to breathe," he says.

COVID-19

Over in Surkhet, Anita Raskloti has been receiving dialysis at home for the past four years, but she has run out of medicines because the government cannot provide them.

Laxman B K returned to Nepal from Saudi Arabia after his kidneys failed, and he has been living in Pokhara where he gets free dialysis at the Gandaki Regional Hospital. "There are no buses, and I cannot afford an ambulance, so I have to walk two hours to get to hospital," he says. Even if the medicines he needs were available, he would not be able to afford the Rs5,000 per month cost because there is no income from his wife's shop.

Although patients seeking medical attention are allowed to travel during the lockdown, the poorest patients cannot find transport, or cannot afford them. In addition, patients receiving treatment thrice a week have now been reduced to twice a week because the medical staff also cannot travel during the lockdown.

Although the government made dialysis free last year, it is not easy to get the service. There is a lot of paperwork needed from the ward office, District Administration Office, District Health Office, and hospitals have waiting lists. Only 57 hospitals in 20 districts provide free dialysis. But hospitals themselves are facing a shortage of medicines due to the lockdown.

Min Bahadur Bista from Kanchanpur has shifted to a rented room in Bhaktapur just to be close to the Shahid Dharmabhakta National Transplant Centre where he gets his free dialysis once a week. After every dialysis he needs a special medicine, which is now more expensive even when it is available.

"This lockdown is more difficult than the earthquake," says Bista, who has been getting



PHOTOS: NIKHILACHARYA

BETWEEN TWO DISEASES: (left to right) Kidney patient waits for an ambulance to take her home from a hospital in Dang. She used to pay Rs 30 for public transport, but the roundtrip ambulance costs Rs700. A patient visits Seti Zonal Hospital for a dialysis but because of the lockdown, the twice-weekly dialysis is now performed only on Mondays.

his dialysis regularly for the past five years. As if the treatment was not difficult enough, other patients have been forced out of their rented rooms because landlords are afraid they will bring the coronavirus from hospital.

In Dang district, Dilmaya Pun must reach the Community Dialysis Center of Lamahi twice in a week for her treatment, but her travel cost has increased from Rs30 in a public transport to Rs750 for the roundtrip by ambulance. She used to reach the hospital in a scooter, but police seized it for breaching lockdown rules.

"Every year, there are 3,000 new kidney patients who need dialysis, and there just are not enough facilities to manage this demand," says nephrologist Santosh Gurung. There are more than 1,000 patients in Kathmandu alone who need treatment, and the difficulties they face have multiplied after the lockdown.

Half of the 54 hospitals designated for kidney dialysis are in Kathmandu Valley, and of the total 525 dialysis machines in the country 276 are in the capital. Some of the machines in government hospitals are not working. Of the ten machines at the Seti Provincial Hospital, only five function.

Kidney patients from Karnali Province are now referred to Nepalganj or Kathmandu due to lack of machines. Kathmandu's hospitals have to not just treat patients from the Valley, but many from west Nepal.

Once a patient's kidneys stop working there are only two options: a kidney transplant like the ones performed on Prime Minister K P Oli, or dialysis twice a week. It takes four hours to complete dialysis procedure, so the machines can treat only three kidney patients in a day.

This means there is a long queue, and hospitals cannot take on any additional patients because the machines are 'booked'. In fact, a wait-listed patient gets a slot for dialysis only if the hospital arranges for additional machines, a patient gets a kidney transplant, or dies.

Hospitals are even reducing the four-hour dialysis to three hours, just so they can accommodate more patients. Most patients cannot afford transplants, so they have no option but to get regular dialysis.

There are 170 kidney patients waiting their turn at Sahid Dharmabhakta National Transplant Centre, 130 at Bir Hospital and 216 at TU Teaching Hospital. While the patients wait for new openings, they have to go to private hospitals

where the service is supposed to be free but often is not.

Patients in the Tarai who used to go to Indian hospitals for dialysis also cannot go now because the border has been sealed for a month.

Mohan Joshi, from Kanchanpur is staying in Bareilly in India after

the lockdown just for his dialysis.

"I want to be close to the hospital, but it is hard to survive and I am running out of money," he said over the phone.

For Jason Sigdel from Khotang who has been taking care of his father undergoing kidney dialysis

in Kathmandu, the lockdown

has become a life-or-death issue.

He says: "Poor kidney patients staying in rented rooms in Kathmandu are suffering the most. There are no medicines, and no more money."

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In Nepal lockdown, a domestic violence spike

Gender-based violence has become a shadow pandemic to COVID-19

Namrata Sharma

Rights activists have reported an increase in cases of violence against women and girls in Nepal in the 7 weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown, and they fear the crimes will increase with the stay-at-home order now extended to last till 18 May.

Gender rights groups had predicted a rise in domestic violence since women and girls are trapped at home with their abusers, but they say the numbers are much more alarming than expected.

There were 176 cases of violence against women and girls in just 18 districts since the lockdown began on 24 March up to 1 May, and this is expected to raise the nationwide annual average of cases of domestic violence this year.

The figures were collated by the gender rights group WOREC (Women's Rehabilitation Centre) from data provided by social counsellors, the Women Human Rights Defenders Network and other partners. The types of violence during the lockdown period included social violence, rape, attempted rape, murder, attempted murder, suicide, attempted suicide, sexual misconduct, and cybercrime. (See chart)

Nepal Police data shows that there were 211 reported complaints of child sexual abuse nationwide in 2018-19, whereas there were 48 cases in the WOREC data for only 6 weeks of the lockdown period in just 18 of Nepal's 77 districts.

"The figures are alarming, and prove that the kind of violence women and girls face in the home environment increases during the lockdown," says Lubharaj Neupane, Executive Director of WOREC. "And there is also a need now to incorporate protection measures for women and girls also in the quarantine centres."

WOREC data shows that the perpetrators in the 176 reported cases in 18 districts include 78 husbands, and 37 members from the family



of the victims. Among the 26 cases of rape recorded during this time, two were gang rapes involving the partner and friend of the survivor.

Most of the victims of violence were in the 17-25 age group, followed by women and girls aged between 26-35. There were 25 girl children below the age of 16 among the survivors.

Most of the victims reported the abuse to police, others went to parents or relatives. The data was collected from Dhanusa, Morang, Rukum, Kailali, Dang, Bardia, Siraha, Saptari, Udaypur, Sunsari, Banke, Syangja, Baglung, Mahottari, Rautahat, Parsa, Kathmandu and Bhaktapur.

"The workload of women has increased during the lockdown, and this raises their vulnerability to gender-based violence," says Shristi Kolakshyapati at WOREC. "The current support mechanism is not adequate to deal with the abuse during the lockdown."

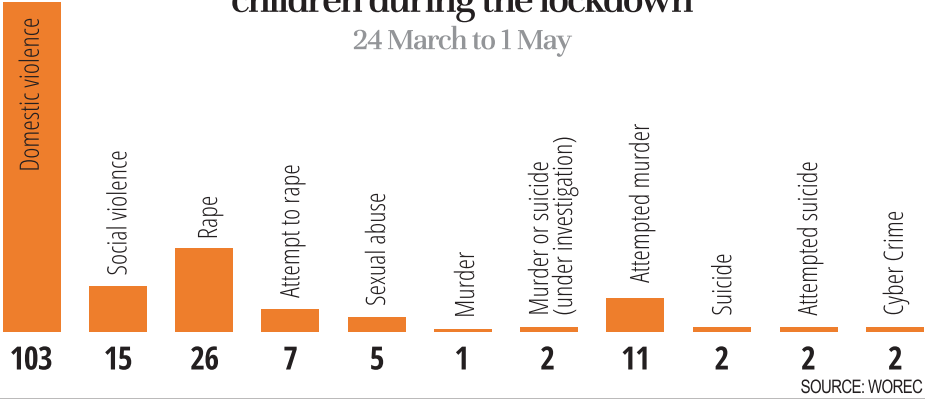
A similar rise in domestic violence was also reported by the Nepal Women's Commission during the lockdown period. The office received 735 calls of which 248 dealt with domestic violence against women, an increase compared to a similar period before the lockdown.

The WOREC data shows that women in all age groups are subjected to violence, and the perpetrators mostly are people they are close to and know well. The figures also show that the lockdown period has increased the vulnerability of younger women and girls.

Globally, there has been a sharp uptick in cases of gender-based violence after national lockdowns. Survivors are also experiencing challenges in accessing services due to limited movement and access to health services.

Data shows that gender based violence has become a 'shadow pandemic' in many parts of the world, including Nepal. 🇳🇵

Domestic violence cases against women and children during the lockdown
24 March to 1 May



Namrata Sharma is the past president of The Centre for Investigative Journalism, Nepal.
namrata1964@yahoo.com
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