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**THE
KATHMANDU
AIRLIFT**
EDITORIAL
PAGE **2**

The Kathmandu Airlift

Nepal's main export item has historically been human labour. Subsistence farmers have been moving out to India in search of jobs. The first overseas Nepali migrants were workers recruited by the British in India for their sugarcane plantations from Fiji to Trinidad. And, of course, Nepalis still enlist in the British and Indian militaries.

But it is the particular failure of governance in post-1990 Nepal that actively promoted overseas migration as an industry. Throughout the UML-NC polarisation in the early 1990s, during the decade-long conflict and the unstable politics since 2006, the state encouraged migration as a safety-valve to cover up its own incompetence in creating the right environment for investment so jobs could be created at home.

The political leaders of the past 30 years, whose failures forced Nepalis to migrate to the Gulf, Malaysia and other countries in ever-larger numbers, are still with us today as the global pandemic wrecks economies. These rulers now have to bear the responsibility of bringing home in an orderly and safe manner Nepalis who want to return. After all, they have been at the frontlines sustaining this country's remittance-based economy.

Repatriation is going to be an enormous challenge. The government's own estimate is that 130,000 Nepalis need to be brought home right away because of loss of jobs due to economic slowdown in host countries. This does not include the tens of thousands in India who are trying to return to Nepal on foot, but are stuck at the border.

The government is said to be working on a return strategy, which is commendable. But it begs the question: what was it doing for the past two months? Other labour exporting countries in the region have already started bringing back their stranded workers in phases. Learning from how we have bungled the arrival of Nepalis at the land border from India, the first strategy should be fool-proof coordination between various government agencies, and between the central and local governments.

Nepal's embassies in India, the Gulf countries and Malaysia have a critical role in collecting data on workers who need to get home, help those who need emergency assistance, work with governments of host countries and overseas Nepali groups on logistical arrangements. Some workers will

have their tickets home paid as per contracts, undocumented Nepalis and others will not be able to afford repatriation flights.

Some embassies have already started preparations, now they need to liaise with Kathmandu in the selection criteria of countries and workers to send home first. In Kuwait, 3,500 Nepalis are already housed in camps awaiting flights chartered by the Kuwait government. In the UAE, the Nepal Embassy is helping Nepalis who have been laid off with food packages while they wait.

The airlift is going to need tremendous coordination and even with multiple daily flights will have to be staggered over months. Then there is the issue of what to do with the workers when they get to Kathmandu airport. There have to be medical tests before boarding because India and Pakistan have had cases where arriving workers tested positive.

Quarantine facilities will fill up fast, so there has to be an orderly process for safe self-isolation. Experience from the Indian border shows that returnees will escape unhygienic and

dangerous quarantines. On arrival screening would be mandatory, and workers should be sent to pre-mapped quarantine facilities in Kathmandu and in home districts. For this, there has to be a bus fleet on standby for the enormous numbers being moved.

The districts with the highest volume of outmigration are in Province 2, and it is likely that is where most returnees will

be going back to. Provincial governments and municipalities will need help with preparation. All this means an enormous amount of PCR testing kits to be made available in Kathmandu as well as in the districts, since each returnee will need multiple tests, including before being allowed home from quarantine.

All levels of government need to have pre-arrival information and communication strategy in place – especially to combat stigma so workers do not face the social ostracisation they are currently exposed to. Politicians could be forced by nationalistic arguments into an ill-prepared knee-jerk repatriation. This may be politically incorrect to say, but many workers who still have jobs or who are being taken care of by employers are probably better off where they are for now.

The government needs to focus on confronting the practical challenges of this massive undertaking, plan well. Then there will be the longer-term crisis of rehabilitating returnees so they can make a decent living in Nepal. Besides test, test, test, government agencies now need to coordinate, coordinate, coordinate.



DRAWING MADE BY BAHRAIN-BASED NEPALI
BHIM BISHWOKARMA DEPICTING HOMECOMING.

The government is said to be working on a return strategy for migrant workers, which is commendable. But it begs the question: what was it doing for the past two months?

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

In issue #503 of Nepali Times, 10 years ago, CK Lal in his weekly column Fourth Estate titled 'Online Incline' writes on the rise of digital journalism in Nepal. Lal recounts the digital journey of this newspaper, and how it started out as an online portal before coming out in print. With a coronavirus lockdown, Nepali Times is back to being a digital only media product. Excerpt from the column:

Nepali Times was online for almost six months before hitting the newsstands a decade ago. Back then, access to the internet even within the Kathmandu Valley was extremely limited. Comments from online readers often bristled with the frustration of homesick professionals in self-exile who knew that few took their opinions seriously. Much time has passed, but the tradition of overseas Nepalis complaining about the situation back home is alive and kicking (mostly the latter).

A critical mass of readers has since evolved that prefers to go online for news. Very few have the time or the inclination to read an entire article, most often clicking the title and pull-quote and scanning the rest of the page before firing off their reactions. The comment sections of web publications are thus often dominated by regular posters shouting at each other in an echo chamber.



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Digital Products Strategist: **Sahina Shrestha**, Associate Editor: **Sonia Awale**, Design: **Kiran Maharjan**
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Times.com

CLEAN KATHMANDU

Switching to electric vehicle will be a great step ('Nepal lockdown proves air quality can be improved', Sonia Awale, #1010). It would reduce air pollution and lead to good health besides saving money on fossil fuel.

Parkaz Gorkhali

■ Kathmandu had fully operational trolley bus service for decades. A similar network can be established. Now there is also reliable supply of electricity. It will reduce thousands of polluting old vehicles.

Ramesh Shrestha

■ The best part is that Nepal's electricity is generated by H2O; not gas, diesel, nuclear fission.

Sameer Rana

■ How did we let this be our new normal ('When the air is clean', Abhushan Gautam, page 7)? Painfully gorgeous (painful because we won't see it again in our lifetime after the crisis blows over).

Tashi Sherpa

■ This is temporary. Once the life gets back to normal, the pollution level will be same as before. But until then we can enjoy.

Bibek Balla

■ Just goes to show how bad things were. Sad to think that it won't last.

Ann Jones

■ Pollution control needs to be a future priority surely?

Sarah Alexander

■ Maybe time to look at the possibilities of restricting the use of cars and motorcycles in the city. Bicycles are a good way to get around.

Julie Damgaard Nielsen

■ Converting to electric vehicles seems to be the solution to clean up Kathmandu and any other cities in the world. COVID-19 proved it.

Dipak Jaru Tuladhar

■ Amazing how quickly nature can start to heal.

Alison Tilley

COVID-19

Great job for doing the work that the government should have organised ('Bhaktapur's COVID-19 heroes', Monika Deupala, page 8). I hope these volunteers do get access to full PPE to protect themselves.

CarKey Byandana

■ No farewells, no ceremonies were allowed in China due to its highly contagious nature. What if fatalities go up here? The Valley cannot simply rely on these volunteers to deal with it.

Vairochana Sherpa

■ The government is not serious at all and we Nepalis are just fortunate not to have high fatalities yet. It's important that every hospital make their own COVID protocol and start coordinating with local authorities.

Deepesh KC

ONLINE SEXISM

Yes very true and our voices against such actions are ignored and further ridiculed ('Epidemic of online sexism', Shusma Barali, nepalitimes.com).

Biniya Dhital Goperma

■ We have still missed transphobia, homophobia and queerphobia in whole. #ComedyAppropriation normalising abuses towards marginalised groups might seem funny to people with privilege but is baneful for those who experience this abuse.

Queer Youth Group

VEGGIES

Correct in theory: in practice it does not make sense ('Nepal lockdown chance for self sufficiency in veggies', Ramesh Kumar, nepalitimes.com). The political economy of this system is wholly dependent (for election and survival) on import barons and other crony businessmen. Why would they kill the goose that lays them golden eggs for the sake of import substitution?

Dipak Gyawali

ALWAYS PLANNING

This government has been planning since it assumed office two years ago and will keep planning until the end of its tenure for the next three years ('Nepal plans to revive economy hit by COVID-19', nepalitimes.com). The only time this government does not plan but act is while taking kickbacks in procurement, selling and buying land at exorbitant prices, and finding any opportunity to make money for the party, the unified Criminal Party of Nepal (CPN).

Shyamal Krishna Shrestha

WHAT'S TRENDING

When the air is clean

by *Abhushan Gautam*

For the first time almost anyone can remember, Mt Everest was visible from Kathmandu Valley with air pollution removed by the lockdown. The breathtaking images published on nepalitimes.com took the Internet by storm and was reproduced by numerous international news sites. Check out this spectacular photo feature that generated hundreds of thousands of views, shares and engagement on page 7, or go online.



Most reached and shared on Facebook



Most commented



Nepal lockdown proves air quality can be improved

by *Sonia Awale*

The COVID-19 has proven the benefits of reducing fossil fuel consumption on public health and national economy. How do we maintain this after the lockdown? Find out in this widely read report available only on our website.



Most popular on Twitter



Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
The #COVID19Lockdown has cleaned the air over #Nepal and northern #India. So much so that for the first time in many years, Mt #Everest can be seen again from #Kathmandu Valley even though it is 200km away. More breathtaking images by @AbhushanGautam: <https://bit.ly/3bypA87>



Diarmid Campbell-Lendrum @DiarmidCL

Health of Nepalis (plus overall quality of life, tourism, etc.) will benefit massively if we can keep this air as clean as possible as the lockdown lifts.



Sacrajit Samanta @SacrajitS

Nature always healed herself. Like dinosaurs, maybe our time has come.



Ankit Pratap Jena @JenaAnkit

Best thing on the Internet today



Prawin Kumar Jha @pralwinal

Heaven is myth, Nepal is real. Another proof.



uttam bajracharya @uttamjp

This is how it used to look like everyday when I grew up there around 45 years back



Paavan Mathema @paavan11

#Kathmandu so clean, curious #Everest showed up to take a look! Abhushan Gautam in @NepaliTimes



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Switching to electric public transport & battery vehicles to reduce petroleum import bill by just 10% would save Rs21 billion a year – besides promoting domestic clean energy & improving health. COVID-19 has provided us the perfect opportunity to do so.



David Pulaski @davidpulaski

What a beautiful sight! We should all work to ensure these views are available for all to see, all year round.



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

When a 29-year-old woman died at Dhulikhel Hospital with #coronavirus, no one wanted to touch her body. A group of volunteers came forward to do what nobody wanted to, organise the cremation. Read about the real heroes of the #COVID19 by @DeupalaMonika



Kushal Pandey @acidradical

Not all heroes wear capes! Salute! When the state failed to provide a proper process, they stepped in selflessly!!!



PHOTOS: KUNDA DIXIT

Coronavirus Nepal Lockdown Month 2

After 50 days what is utterly extraordinary has come to seem normal, the unimaginable is commonplace

The ancient brick walls of the Patan Darbar absorb the dull afternoon light like spilled claret. A black dog slinks behind a doorway and a woman in a pale sari gazes immobile from a high window, but otherwise the square is empty.



SO FAR SO GOOD
Lisa Choegyal

Temples are closed, worship is suspended, offerings banned, bells muted and lamps left unlit, monitored by the occasional passing police patrol. Two long wooden benches flank the magnificent nipple-studded gold doorway, usually packed with lounging locals and tired tourists soaking up the sun and watching the world go by.

But now the palace door is slammed tight shut, gleaming dully in the overcast afternoon, and the seats, polished by generations of grateful bottoms, are bare and bereft.

Across the silent Valley, streets deserted, shops shuttered, offices closed, hotels barred and government gates padlocked, the reclining Vishnu at Budhanilkantha lies abandoned and alone. His black stone limbs are strewn with dead flower petals and rotting leaves blown through the concrete fence. Barricaded behind chunky chains wrapped around his metal gates, the normally bustling temple precinct, never without worshippers, pilgrims and prayers, is still and lifeless.

A defiant smear of vermilion stains a tree near the entrance. Narayan's celestial powers protect the Valley swamped by this unnatural quiet, and bolster the nation's battle against the invisible coronavirus to be vanquished with a strategy of isolation, closures and lockdown, defeated by a drumbeat of hand washing, face masks and social distancing.

The silence of the airport departure terminal is all pervasive, the car park empty, the doors locked, and inside the dusty check-in desks and rows of untenanted immigration booths stand sentinel to former days. The rare evacuation flights and the occasional cargo plane bring the place alive with masked staff and gloved security personnel. An aircraft overhead causes us to stop and raise our eyes in witness to an unusual event. Every motor engine sounds unnaturally loud in the Valley hush with which we have become habituated.

After 57 days of Nepal lockdown, what is utterly extraordinary has come to seem normal, the unimaginable has become



THE SOUND OF SILENCE: (top to bottom) International terminal at Kathmandu Airport is deserted on the 51st day of the nationwide COVID-19 lockdown. Immigration hall inside the airport which hasn't seen any activity except for rare cargo or repatriation flights is squeaky clean.

commonplace. I wake at dawn thinking: 'Is this for real?'. 'Unprecedented', 'historic', 'incredible' are all overused words, but how else to relate, to express, to process our current situation. We are becoming inured to scenes and situations throughout the world that a scant few weeks ago would have been unthinkable.

Thousands of aircraft are patiently parked along the periphery of unused runways as flights worldwide are grounded by the pandemic, machinery moth-balled and travellers confined to home. The vast skies above South Asia are devoid of air traffic, all borders sealed, domestic flights forbidden, and not even citizens permitted to return home. The airline industry is suffering its worst ever crisis, and when planes do take off on the other side of this disaster, aviation will never look the same again.

Global tourism is realising how its tentacles extend far beyond the obvious frontline of hospitality – airlines, transport, hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, tours and attractions – into less obvious areas of the arts, theatre, design, banking, education, conservation, and of course agriculture and food production.

Businesses that have taken a lifetime to

build are crumbling day by day. Touts and beggars are jobless, working horses, donkeys, elephants and camels are having a holiday, wild nature is flourishing in the respite, but the roaming street dogs and stupa monkeys are hungry. The world is at a standstill, the suffering stark.

Sporting events are cancelled, competition abandoned, arenas empty, stadiums forsaken, games aborted, scoreboards blank, ladders and league tables on hold. The massive preparations for race meets, world cups and Olympics evaporate in the face of the most destructive viral onslaught of our lifetimes.

Footballers have hung up their boots, racehorses remain in their stables, and the green lawns of Wimbledon see no tennis

served with Pimms and strawberries. In bizarre efforts to keep audiences engaged, matches are played in vacant venues, and Formula One and sailing regattas have resorted to virtual events online. There is no fear of missing out, as the sporting world is on 'pause'.

Desperate people queue around the block, snaking for hours through socially distanced circles, for free meals or access to food banks – and not just daily wage earners deprived of employment in emerging nations, but white-

collar workers in the world's major capitals of London, Paris and New York.

Public parks are enjoyed only by ducks on the ponds, solitary trees and insects in the flowers, blushing unseen in the deserted gardens. Jobs are being lost, companies collapsing, rents unpaid, loans and mortgages reneged.

In Nepal we are familiar with political shutdowns closing the roads and shuttering the shops, strikes that never lasted more than a day or two. The strict curfew that accompanied the king agreeing to lift the ban on political parties in April 1990 was only suffered for three days.

We are exhorted to stay safe and shelter in place, as the walls close in and perimeters shrink, moulded by the relentless confines of our homes. Rooms contract and expand, depending on our state of mind and time of day. Vivid night dreams infiltrate beyond sleep to penetrate the waking hours. Is that a dent on the sofa cushion where I have been sitting glued to my laptop day after day, week after week?

Tenzin paces the driveway, wearing out his prayer beads, the tyres of his unused car softening on the flagstones. The cuckoos have arrived and the whistling thrush has nested. The roses have budded, bloomed and died, the extravagant white petals of the magnolia have exploded before wilting waxy brown, and the cherry tree has carpeted the ground with crimson blossom and is now clad in hopeful fresh green.

Within the relentless rhythm of the lockdown the formless days unfold, measured in perpetual birdsong and sheets of vitamin pills, all plans in suspension, all projects on hold. In theory, now is the chance to read, watch movies, wallow in Netflix, listen to music, sort photos, fix the house, and call friends but in reality I struggle with the focus and motivation to do any of it.

I have learned to value every cup of coffee, waste no food, and prize the fresh vegetables bought from the end of the lane. How sweet is that first mango of the season, and with what difficulties must it have travelled to arrive whole and perfect green and gold on our kitchen table.

None of us has seen anything on this scale before and emerging on the other side of it will have its own unknown shocks and challenges. But when we do, and when we are asked in some future virus-free era: 'What was it like during the time of COVID-19, the great pandemic of 2020?', these are the moments and memories I do not want to forget. 🇳🇵

COVID-19

NEPAL'S ACCIDENTAL LEADERS

Now that the Army is in the business of importing medicine, why not deploy the Ministry of Health to defend Lipu Lekh?



DIWAKAR CHHETTRI

Whenever Nepal's political 'leaders' ask us what they should be doing, our response is usually: "When you were in jail, what did you resolve to do when you were released and came to power?"



1/2 FULL
Anil Chitrakar

Over the years the reaction from those leaders has always been a sheepish smile. Let us give them the benefit of the doubt: they simply do not remember. In fact oral tradition says that when people get to the corridors of power, they forget how they got there in the first place.

The debacle in the health sector in trying to come to grips with a global pandemic is that it needs to ask the country's military to step in to procure medical supplies. Kathmandu's lip service

to India's land grab in Kalapani is another symptom of the deeper moral malaise that plagues Nepal's accidental political leadership.

One popular politician once related how he came to be a 'leader'. His college was organising a blood donation program which was disrupted by the police. The officer who beat him up said, "You want to spill communist blood in Nepal? Let me help you." The pain of the beating and having to sleep in a cold cell turned him into a Dear Leader. Even today he reminds others that they went on to become engineers and doctors because they did not have the luck to be beaten up and detained like him.

These accidental leaders missed hygiene class, hence do not know about virus. They missed geography class, and therefore cannot draw a map of Nepal, especially of its northwestern tip. They also know that the Nepal Army cannot be investigated and hence pushed it to build fast tracks and import masks.

One accidental leader was recently asked, "Now that the Army is importing medicines, should we not send the Ministry of Health to defend Lipu Lekh?"

Many Nepalis believed these accidental political leaders when they were blaming the mysterious Foreign Hand for anything that was wrong with Nepal. But today we have turned into a country that waits for India's Republic Day to get free ambulances. We need the Swiss to buy us COVID-19 test kits and UNDP to connect ministries to Zoom.

The building in which the Nepal's Parliament sits for the budget session is a birthday gift from the Chinese government to King Birendra – and it was supposed to be a convention centre. Our parliamentary democracy couldn't even build its own Parliament.

Nepalis are finally beginning to ask what happens to all the taxes we pay. There never seems to be a

shortage of money when politicians and bureaucrats need the latest SUVs but we cannot afford a Zoom account?

The people of Kathmandu, many of whom have sold their homesteads in the districts to buy a tiny patch in the Valley, have started roof gardens to grow vegetable and rented remaining floors. The market is full of vegetables grown on roof terraces. In fact, 58 days into the lockdown, there is no visible shortage of vegetables or black marketing in Kathmandu.

With the global economic downturn there is a real possibility of Nepalis coming home from all over the world. Many countries want to protect jobs for their own citizens, and hence Nepal may experience brain gain sooner than many would have predicted. We may have doctors, nurses, builders and service providers who are now second to none due to the experience they have received

in the world's most advanced economies.

The post COVID-19 economy in Nepal could do really well if they are given the incentives to start businesses and create jobs. They always told us they would return one day and rebuild and develop Nepal. We all know that good human resources are the most critical variable to develop a country and not just its natural resources endowment – just like Japan or Korea.

The COVID-19 crisis could be turned into a chance for a Great Leap Forward. Nepalis returning to Nepal should not be seen as a problem but an opportunity for growth.

Our accidental leaders will get due credit because if it was not for their mismanagement, Nepalis would never have left Nepal in the first place. The glass is indeed half full. 🇳🇵

Anil Chitrakar is President of Siddharthinc.

NEPAL
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Times.com

Nepal's airlines can take off again

Aviation will revive post-lockdown if the government reduces the high price of aviation fuel

The tourism industry has collapsed globally. Several airlines are on the verge of shutting down, leading to millions of workers being out of work. Nepal's airlines will be no exception.



COMMENT

Birendra B Basnet

Over 272,000 Nepalis are employed directly within this sector, but if all people in the value chain that support this industry are included, this number will be in the millions. A big source of foreign currency earning will also disappear.

The Nepal government's prompt action to lockdown the country two months ago has saved many from sickness and death. But a lockdown is not a cure, it has just bought us time to put other measures in place to control the spread of the virus.

The World Health Organisation has warned that the virus will be around for years, and pandemic may only be over when, and if, a vaccine is available. For Nepal that may take additional years.

An indefinite lockdown is not the solution, and the restrictions will create massive unemployment, and lead to a spread of poverty and hunger, which could culminate in civil unrest.

Almost 90% of businesses in Nepal are closed, and the current lack of loan servicing will create a banking crisis since 50% of these borrowings are through personal deposits that require monthly

servicing. Furthermore, there are more than a million Nepalis waiting to return home from overseas. A drop in remittances will impact the country's balance of payments deficit.

Public health experts must come up with a timeline on easing the lockdown so that the economy can begin to get back on track. We delayed testing in the first month of the lockdown because of the lack of kits. In the past two weeks, we have seen a surge of cases as testing increased among migrant workers and those they came in contact with.

Once more Nepalis return from abroad, there may be many new cases.

We must develop contagion prevention protocols for all walks of life. Wearing masks, hand washing and sanitising, and physical distancing must be an established part of daily activity. Everyone must be vigilant, and self-quarantine or get tested immediately if symptoms develop, being alert about the health of family, friends, and colleagues at the workplace.

We also now begin to analyse the available data after testing reaches a critical point and infer permissible risks in order to open up the economy. This analysis could be achieved by knowing the rate of tests conducted, the distribution of asymptomatic and critical cases, and, most importantly, the death rate due to COVID-19.

Kathmandu valley accounts for 30% of the recreational tourist movement to Chitwan and Pokhara, and we must prepare for the movement of Nepali visitors to these two destinations once the lockdown is eased.

There will have to be well thought out

COVID-19 Prevention Protocols for the tourism and aviation industry which can be closely monitored and traced. There have to be enough test kits and isolation facilities as well as management guidelines in place to prevent the spread of the virus.

Once we create the confidence that Kathmandu, Pokhara and Chitwan are safe destinations with the movement of international visitors, particularly from India and China. Our advantage is direct connections to the two giant markets at our doorstep.

Buddha Air has completed a comprehensive COVID-19 Prevention Protocol and all staff are being trained to follow it

minutely. Through our 100% subsidiary Buddha Holidays, we are working with hotels in Pokhara and Chitwan to finalise and implement their Prevention Protocols as well. We will monitor these carefully to assure safety, and have started marketing these holiday packages in Kathmandu at very reasonable rates. They will be ready for sale and use as soon as the government lifts the lockdown.

We need to move fast for early bird advantage. Southeast Asian countries have already started opening bookings from August. If we move to cater to domestic tourists, we can start marketing in China and India for the autumn season.

There may be a silver lining in the current crisis because restrictions in global travel could mean outbound tourists in our region will want to travel nearer to home countries. If we act early, we might be able to attract more tourists from just India and China than what

Visit Nepal 2020 envisioned.

Similar to other domestic airlines, Buddha Air was in full swing till the morning of 23 March, and all flights were grounded the next day. Since then we are at zero revenue for two months and counting. Airlines operate on continuous cash flow which is the reason most of us are facing extreme hardships.

Buddha Air is a live entity for us, which we will nurture and protect so that all those who work for it are taken care of. The paramount philosophy is the sense of ownership of each and every employee towards the company. Therefore, we will not lay off a single employee but try to confront the crisis collectively.

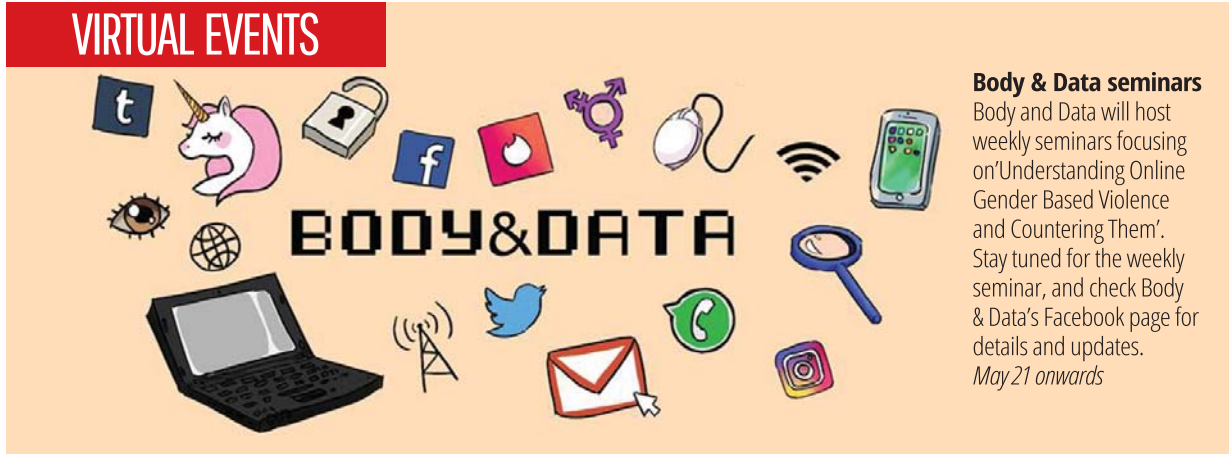
Buddha Air is not looking for any grant or subsidy from this government. We can keep going till September. However, we do expect the government to reduce the price of Air Transport Fuel (ATF) to be closer to the global price. In India the ATF price is NPR 36 per litre in Kolkata, but it is NPR 75 in Nepal. China provides a 50% subsidy on ATF price for domestic aviation, and the sector has rebounded to +2% year-on-year from 2019.

We are confident that things will start returning to a new normal by October 2020 and we can weather this storm that has hit the global aviation sector. Our strategy is to provide cheaper fares for Nepali passengers so that the middle class can afford to fly. This will also be much safer than traveling many hours by surface transport, and it will sustain domestic aviation without the government having to spend money on its rescue. 🇳🇵

Birendra B Basnet is Managing Director of Buddha Air.



VIRTUAL EVENTS



Body & Data seminars

Body and Data will host weekly seminars focusing on 'Understanding Online Gender Based Violence and Countering Them'. Stay tuned for the weekly seminar, and check Body & Data's Facebook page for details and updates. *May 21 onwards*

Blockchain meet-ups

Blockchain meet-up sessions aim to create a platform for blockchain enthusiasts to help grow the much-needed blockchain community in Nepal. Check the eSatya Facebook page to join the webinar. *22 May, 5pm-6pm*

Bake It Easy

Nestlé Toll House is doing a 'Bake It Easy' online baking series featuring their head baker, Meredith Tomason. The free tutorials, posted on the company's Instagram page

every week, feature delicious recipes. Previous episodes are archived on the Nestlé Toll House IGTV.

Furious Fiction

The Australian Writing Centre reveals a new set of story prompts on the first Friday of every month. Aspiring writers will have 55 hours to submit a 500-word-or-less story for the chance to win AUD500. Open to anyone 17 years and older anywhere in the world. Stay tuned for the next prompt on 5 June.



Yoga Classes

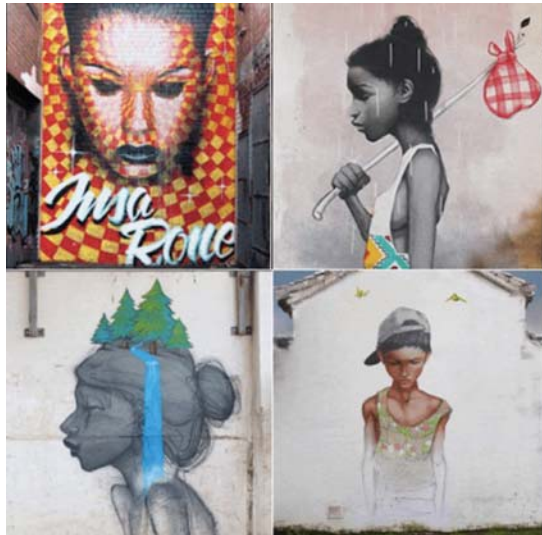
Niru Yoga Homestay and Yoga Retreat Center brings free online yoga class every Saturday and Sunday. Check the centre's Facebook page for the link to the meeting. *23 May, 1pm*

ONLINE ARCHIVES



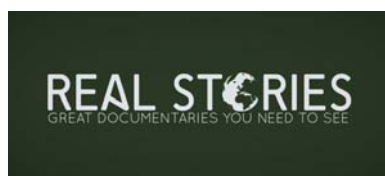
Global Nepali Museum

Global Nepali museum is the first database of its kind in Nepal that features Nepali art and artefacts that are housed in museums around the world. Go to the museum website and learn about sculptures, paintings, as well as contemporary art, and other Nepali cultural objects.



Virtual street art

Google Arts Project: Street Art showcases the world's greatest graffiti works and tells the stories behind them, including those of Nepal. Viewers can take virtual walking tours, view online exhibitions and learn about the artists themselves.



Real Stories

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



Oversimplified

On OverSimplified, history is not as contrived as it seems. Head on to YouTube and watch historical events- both widely known and obscure- get explained with depth and humour. Start from the detailed breakdown of World War I.

QUARANTINE DINING

Achaar Ghar

Order home-cooked meals along with various choices of pickles prepared using recipes passed down from generations. *Delivery: 12pm-6:30pm, (01) 5541952*



Mamagoto Nepal

Enjoy delicious Pan-Asian food from Mamagoto, a restaurant that serves a variety of Asian fusion dishes. Order Spring Rolls, Soups, Dumplings, Ramen and more from Foodmandu. *Delivery: 12pm-6:30pm*



Freddo Cafe

Browse Freddo Cafe's menu for all things pizza. Try the Calzone pizza. Call for direct delivery or order through Foodmandu and Bhoj Apps. *Delivery: 12pm - 7pm, 9818883350, 9843451390 (01) 4218792*



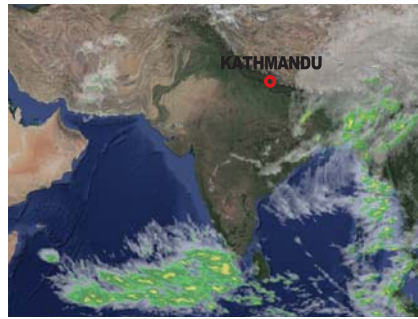
Urutora Restaurant

Experience authentic Japanese food with a Nepali taste. Browse the lockdown menu on Foodmandu to order sushi, sashimi, seafood and more. *Delivery: 12pm-6:15pm*



OR2K

Head on the the OR2K Facebook page to order delicious middle eastern/multicusine vegan and vegetarian dishes. Get the "Make Your Own Pizza" or the OR2K signature Zuri Cake *Delivery: 12pm-6:15pm*

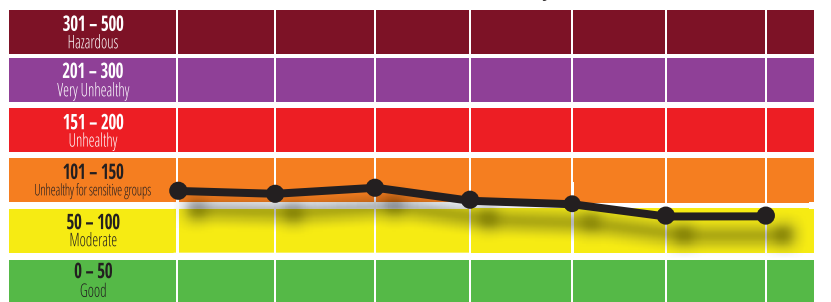


The story of the week was Cyclone Amphan which slammed in from the Bay of Bengal affecting eastern Nepal with wind, rain and snow. It's periphery grazed Kathmandu, and the system has been pushed eastwards by prevailing winds. The moisture from it will bring some stormy rain into the weekend.

FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
28° 18°	27° 19°	26° 19°

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 15 - 21 May



FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY
May 15	May 16	May 17	May 18	May 19	May 20	May 21

With fewer showers, Kathmandu's Air Quality Index (AQI) stayed in the Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups, mainly because of fine particles of wind-blown sand from the Thar desert as well as soot from open garbage burning in the Valley. But with the wind picking up from Cyclone Amphan, AQI improved to Moderate levels. As pre-monsoon shower pick up again, the AQI is set to improve next week. <https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>

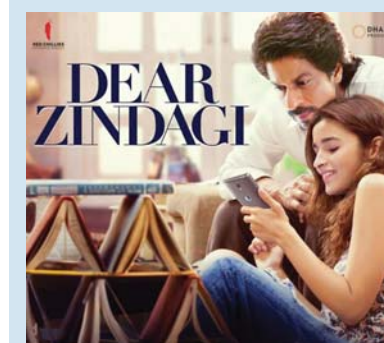
ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI



Energy conservation is an important factor in reducing our carbon footprint. One of the simplest ways to save energy is to turn off the lights and electrical equipments when they are not in use. Leaving electrical equipments on standby still needlessly uses up energy, so it is best to turn them off. This will have an even bigger impact in an office environment. Office equipment is the fastest growing energy user in the business world. Making these small adjustments can significantly save money by prolonging the lifespan of equipments and reducing the electricity bill.

OUR PICK



The 2016 Indian coming of age drama starring Alia Bhatt, *Dear Zindagi* revolves around a budding filmmaker Kaira with unresolved emotional issues stemming from her troubled childhood and her journey to gaining new perspective in life. The award-winning movie directed by Gauri Shinde has Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan in a pivotal role as Kaira's psychiatrist.

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

फोन: नं. १०९८ मा खबर गरौं ।



नेपाल सरकार

सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय

सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग



A panoramic view of Kathmandu as seen from Chobar on 10 May. From left to right, Gang Chhenpo, Urkinmang, Kangshrum, Gurkapo Ri, Dorje Lakpa, Lonpo Gang, Gyalzen Peak, Phurbi Ghyachu, Choba Bhamare, Gauri Shankar, Kang Nachugo, Mt Everest, Chobutse and Trakar Go.

ALL PHOTOS: ABHUSHAN GAUTAM

UP WHERE THE AIR IS CLEAR

Photographs of Kathmandu Valley with air pollution removed by the coronavirus lockdown

Abhushan Gautam

The reduction of vehicular emission due to the COVID-19 lockdown has cleaned the air over Nepal and northern India. So much so that the Himalaya is visible from Chandigarh, Kangchenjunga is visible from Siliguri. And for the first time in many years, Mt Everest can be seen again from Kathmandu Valley even though it is 200km away.

Despite the sharp reduction in fossil fuel consumption due to restricted mobility, air quality of Kathmandu did not improve as much as expected in April. The reason was wildfires in Dhading, Nuwakot and Chitwan in early April and open garbage burning in the Valley, as well as crossborder haze.

The lockdown, however, did prove that we can improve Kathmandu's air quality by reducing vehicular emissions, which contribute 70% of the particulates in the ambient air.

These breathtaking images were taken from Chobar in Kathmandu Valley on 10 May on a remarkably clear evening.



Gurkapo Ri, Dorje Lakpa, Lonpo Gang and Gyalzen Peak.



Gauri Shankar, Kang Nachugo, Mt Everest, Chobutse.



The trinity of Baudha Himal, Himalchuli and Manaslu are silhouetted to the west of Kathmandu by the sunset.



HARD AT WORK: (left to right) Arun Saiju of the RNA-16 volunteer group in front of the private SUV which the owner donated for use as a rescue van. The RNA-16 volunteer team in front of Bhaktapur Hospital's emergency ward.

Bhaktapur's COVID-19 heroes

A group of volunteers is doing work with coronavirus that no one else wants to do

Monika Deupala

When a 29-year-old woman died at Dhulikhel Hospital on Saturday, fear spread through the hospital, among her family and neighbours in her home town of Barabise, Teaching Hospital in Kathmandu where she had delivered a baby a week previously. No one wanted to touch her body in the hospital ward for the whole day.

Fanned by alarming reports of the spread of COVID-19 in the media, hospitals in Nepal are facing the problem of stigma of medical staff as well as patients. Now, with the first three fatalities from the disease there is also the added problem of handling of bodies and funerals.

For the whole day Saturday in Dhulikhel Hospital, the problem was to organise the cremation of the young mother. The Ministry of Health got involved, but crucial help came from a group of volunteers in Bhaktapur who have been active since the 2015 earthquake in search and rescue after training from the Nepal Police and the Army.

The real frontliners in Nepal's coronavirus fight are people like Arun Sainju, Rajesh Gainju of the volunteer group RNA-16 who have been helping out for the past two

months at Bhaktapur Hospital because no one else would.

Since when the lockdown began on 24 March, the thirty-something Sainju and Gainju with other members of the team have been living in a tent inside the Bhaktapur Hospital premises in case they themselves are carriers of the virus.

They have been helping people coming in for tests, and transferring their swab samples to Kathmandu. They spend most days in their personal protection gowns and masks, transporting patients to hospital or disinfecting their homes.

"I was inspired to become a volunteer after I failed to save a 11-year-old girl who had drowned," recalls Arun Sainju. "From that day on, I decided to be trained to work in emergency situations."

The training came handy immediately when the earthquake struck five years ago, destroying a large part of Bhaktapur, killing at least 300 residents and destroying many homes. Arun and Rajesh worked shoulder to shoulder with the Nepal Army teams to dig survivors out of the rubble and take them to hospital.

This time, it was not a natural disaster,

but a protracted humanitarian crisis. Most days, they are just helping where necessary, but Saturday's call from the Nepal Army base was different: they were asked to go to Dhulikhel to collect the first COVID-19 fatality and bring it to Pashupati to the electric crematorium.

The authorities in Dhulikhel had asked Bhaktapur for help because no ambulance driver was willing to take her to the crematorium. The team was confident they were taking necessary precautions because they had been trained to handle infected patients, and headed out to Dhulikhel.

"It was like the hospital was in a curfew, not even the media was there," Arun recalls. "At the morgue we saw blood dripping out of the body, and we wrapped her in plastic, and disinfected the morgue."

The body was loaded into the team's private SUV and escorted by army and police along the highway from Dhulikhel to Pashupati. The woman's husband followed and kept a safe distance throughout.

"We are here to help people in need but we believe that even a dead person needs to be treated with dignity, and has the right to

have a proper funeral," says Rajesh.

Members of RNA-16 are often asked by friends and relatives why they do what they do, and if they are not scared. They admit that the hardest part is to be away from their families for so long for fear of taking the virus home. Arun has a 62-year-old mother, and Rajesh's family has been living in a temporary shelter for five years after the earthquake destroyed their home.

Says Arun: "We do what we have to do, not helping would invite a bigger disaster for the community in future. That is what keeps us going and gives us a sense of fulfilment."

At the electric crematorium, the woman's family kept a distance, and only a member of the crematorium staff was in the switch room. There were no religious rituals, and finally Arun, Rajesh and his team lifted the body and placed it in the furnace.

They then incinerated their PPEs, disinfected their car and other material and have placed themselves in quarantine in Suryabinayak from where they spoke to *Nepali Times* on the phone.

The husband and relatives of the women were taken to the isolation ward of Dhulikhel Hospital. Other members of the RNA-16 are carrying on the COVID-19 work at Dhulikhel Hospital for now. ■

COVID-19

The story of Nepal's first COVID-19 fatality

The country's high maternal mortality rate intersects with the coronavirus pandemic

Laxmi Basnet

The pregnant 29-year-old woman from Barabise was living in Kathmandu so she could be near a maternity hospital for her delivery. She gave birth to a baby boy one month prematurely at Teaching Hospital, and since the child was doing well both were sent home.

A week later, on 13 May the woman's mother visited them to see if the baby was doing well. Instead, she noticed her daughter was going to the toilet frequently and that night she complained of difficulty in breathing and had a dry cough.

Being a health worker herself, the woman's mother tried to find a vehicle to take her to hospital but there was none available. Next morning, the nearest clinic referred the patient to Dhulikhel Hospital.

"We went to the health post, came back home to get her clothes and she had to walk up and down the slope to her house, and after that we drove to Dhulikhel," the mother recalled. "Imagine how that would have strained a new mother."

By this time, there were traces of blood in the patient's cough.



A young mother, Nepal's first COVID-19 fatality, being taken out at the electric crematorium in Pashupati on Saturday.

Breathing was so difficult that she had to be given oxygen in the ambulance. The Arniko Highway was deserted because of the lockdown, so they took only an hour and half to get to Dhulikhel

Hospital. By that time, she had gone blue and was no longer breathing. The emergency doctors pronounced her dead. Throat and nasal swabs were taken from the body and tested at the hospital, and

the mother was found to be positive for coronavirus. Fear gripped the hospital after that, ambulance drivers refused to take her for cremation, and the woman's body lay there all day on 16 May.

The Ministry of Health had to intervene, and with the help of volunteers, she was taken to the electric crematorium at Pashupati escorted by Nepal Army and Police. Her husband was not allowed into the chamber to perform last rites, and had to observe from afar.

The woman's husband, mother, baby as well as a neighbour who had accompanied them to the hospital are now all quarantined at Dhulikhel Hospital. Fortunately the whole family has tested negative for the virus. Some hospital staff and volunteers who took them for cremation are also in isolation for two weeks. For the relatives, added to the pain of bereavement is the worry about the baby and the woman's 10-year-old son who is back at home in Barabise. The quarantine space in the hospital is also dark and stuffy, and the family is concerned about the baby's health.

"I wish there was more sunlight here, but they have told us we cannot go out," the mother said over the phone from Dhulikhel, while the baby could be heard crying in the background. "All right, Baini, I have to hang up now the baby is crying. This is so sad, the epidemic took away my young daughter." ■

From Bhutanese refugee to coronavirus caregiver

After 16 years in a refugee camp in Nepal, Laxmi Biswa is saving lives of COVID-19 patients in the United States

Gopal Gartoula
in Pennsylvania

Laxmi Biswa was four years old when her father carried her on his shoulder across the border to India, joining other Bhutanese forced out of their country. The refugees were packed into trucks and dumped in Nepal's Jhapa district.

Born in Phuntostling, Laxmi grew up in the family homestead in Samchi. She was among 100,000 other Nepali-speakers driven out by the Bhutan regime starting 1990. Laxmi spent 16 years in a bamboo shed in Sector E of Sanischare refugee camp, and went to a school supported by the United National High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

She had just started college in Biratnagar when her family was brought to the United States in 2008 under an international third-country repatriation program. The US took a bulk of the refugees, while fewer numbers were settled in Australia, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand and the UK.

Laxmi continued her undergraduate studies, working part-time to pay for her education. She is now enrolled in a medical science course at the University of Kansas and works at the AdventHealth Shawnee Mission where she has to care for COVID-19 patients.

The US state of Kansas has over 8,000 confirmed cases, and is seeing a daily addition of 400 new infections. The statewide death toll has crossed 180.

On 6 May, Laxmi Biswa suddenly got a call from Bollywood actress Priyanka Chopra after being selected among five female frontliners in



DESTINY: After her family was driven out of Bhutan, Laxmi Biswa grew up in a refugee camp in Nepal and was resettled in the United States in 2008. She is now a nurse caring for COVID-19 patients in Kansas (left).



the fight against the coronavirus.

But it was the real Priyanka Chopra and she asked about how her nursing job taking care of coronavirus patients was going. "How are you coping?" asked the celebrity star who was Miss World in 2000, has acted in Hollywood films like *Isn't It Romantic*, is a UNICEF Goodwill ambassador, and has her own child welfare foundation in India.

Laxmi was among four other women to have made it on Priyanka Chopra's initiative to honour women in the frontlines of the

fight against coronavirus around the world. The weekly winners each receive \$5,000, and Laxmi says she is giving away her prize to the needy in her community.

Asked what they talked about, Laxmi is emotional because the conversation was about how she recently lost her mother, and was distraught because she could not be with her in her last days.

"I told Priyanka that I know how it feels for a very sick person not to have relatives nearby, and most of my patients also do not

have their near and dear ones with them because of the virus," she says. "So, I try to be there for my patients, but it makes me very emotional because of my own loss."

Laxmi Biswa is a single mother, and is raising a three-year-old daughter. She says of her long journey as a refugee child from Bhutan to America: "I have seen a lot in my life, there has been suffering and loss. But that gives me the strength to confront this latest crisis. It motivates me even more to serve others." 🇳🇵

Travellers stuck in Nepal help locals in need

Foreigners refuse repatriation flights and help Nepalis affected by the COVID-19 lockdown

Sonia Awale

Foreign embassies have evacuated most of their nationals stuck in Nepal by the lockdown in the past two months. But with flights from Kathmandu cancelled for at least another month, remaining foreigners have decided to stay on and help Nepalis affected by the lockdown.

As the pandemic raged through Europe, the United States and now Brazil, many travellers who found themselves in Nepal refused to be repatriated, and decided to stay on in Pokhara, Kathmandu, Khumbu and Manang.

One of them is Austrian graphic designer Tom Cisar who has been in Pokhara since late February and has decided to stay back even though his country is easing its restrictions on movement.

A team from Chay Ya Austria and its Nepali branch have been carrying out the Tuesday4Rice campaign to help poor families in Pokhara with essential supplies such as rice, lentils, salt, oil and soap to last them a month. The city has been hit because many have lost their income in the tourism industry.

So far 75 families have benefitted from the charity and 31 more are on the waiting list. The team wants to continue with the food distribution every week and donations have been coming in from all over the world, including Austria, Norway, France, Russia, Spain, Italy and Switzerland.

"For just 20 euros we can support one family for a full month and we are grateful for all the help we have received. I only wish we could do this for as long as needed and stay in Nepal longer to help," adds Cisar who has been volunteering with the non-profit



LESLEY D JUNLAKAN

HELPING HANDS: Lesley D Junlakan (centre) with one of the trekking guide's family who received daily essential to tide them over during the lockdown.

Chay Ya since 2014 and spends five months a year in Nepal.

Briton Lesley D Junlakan is also waiting it out in Nepal until she can return to Bangkok where she is a freelance writer and photographer. She regularly volunteers in Nepal at Kag Chode Monastery in Kagbeni and Pokhara.

On the fifth anniversary of the 2015 earthquake she provided essential commodities for 12 families of trekking guides and porters living in Kathmandu. But fundraising has not been easy.

"Unlike the earthquake when there was an outpouring donations

from around the world, this time it has been difficult to ask for help because everyone is affected by the COVID-19," says Junlakan who is now working on launching a sponsorship program with which donors can chose a specific family to support for a longer term.

She adds: "Once the lockdown is over, we are also looking to provide them with training such as cooking and English language classes so that they are not solely dependent on mountaineering expeditions for their livelihood."

In Kathmandu's Jhochhen, Spaniards Jesus Trujillo and

Mercedes Banos with a local guide spent three weeks identifying families in need and providing them with daily essentials and cash to help them tide over the coronavirus lockdown.

Trujillo And Banos had arrived in Kathmandu in early March from India for a visa-run and were not expecting to stay beyond 10 days. After realising how the lockdown has hit the poorest in the country, they decided to start a project 'Helping Families in Kathmandu'.

"This is my first time in Nepal and the experience has been quite

intense but at the end of the day when you see people smile because of the support they have received in this difficult time, all of it is worth it," says Trujillo who works with museums in the Netherlands.

"My first time in Nepal was during the 2015 earthquake. In fact I had arrived just a day before the disaster and I ended up helping with digging people out alive of the rubble," recalls Banos who is a prenatal yoga instructor back home. "And here I'm back in Nepal as we face another crisis. It's like my destiny to help Nepalis in need."

Elsewhere, there are still many tourists and travellers making the best of their time in Nepal while they wait to go back home. Despite the first three COVID-19 fatalities they still consider Nepal safer than many other places in the world.

Mario Vazquez is a data scientist from Mexico City and has been stranded in Pokhara since the second week from March. With no embassy here in Nepal he has to travel to India for a possible repatriation flight.

"But Mexican embassy hasn't been very responsible towards their travelling citizens in this time of need and going to India isn't ideal either, I will be in more danger of contracting the virus there," he told *Nepali Times* on the phone.

Khesrau Pamir from Holland had come to Nepal for a fresh start back in January. He took a month-long yoga instructor course and trekked to Everest Base Camp before settling in Pokhara due to the lockdown.

He says: "I know the health system here is much more fragile compared to back home but I feel settled here and peaceful. The hospitality of people here has added to my decision to ride out the crisis in Nepal." 🇳🇵



Uncertainties for Nepali overseas students with COVID-19

Nepali students waiting to join colleges abroad for 2020 session are in limbo

Alisha Sijapati

Just when Nepali students thought 2020 was going to be their year, the coronavirus happened. Preparing to go overseas for higher studies, they have all been left in a lurch, uncertain about their future.

Like millions of other students around the world who had been enrolled for the new academic year in August, Nepali students fear they have to put their dreams on hold. The lockdown in Nepal, an indefinite ban on flights and uncertainty about whether universities will open physically or not, 2020 looks bleak.

Arjun Bhattarai has got a scholarship to study liberal arts as an undergraduate at Harvard University. Since receiving an acceptance offer, the teenager's excitement has turned into doubt.

"I received my admission decision in late March, and I was working on my I20, applying for a visa and getting documents ready, but because of the pandemic everything is shut down," said Bhattarai from his hometown Nawalparasi, where he is stuck because of the lockdown.

Sanghamitra Subba who was on a gap year after graduating from school in Nepal, was looking forward to pursue her Bachelors' degree in Rochester, New York later this year. Her plans are also up in the air.

Numerous universities all over the world have already planned to postpone the academic session to January 2021, while others have gone online despite the time



NEPALI TIMES ARCHIVE/GOPEN RAI

difference. Many US universities have given admitted students the option of a deferral.

Subba, who initially thought of deferring, is now considering to take online classes even if the time difference would be inconvenient. She says: "It will be quite challenging, especially considering that a lot of my classes will be discussion-based on Zoom."

However, if the travel ban is lifted, both Subba and Bhattarai say they plan to attend in-person class at their US universities.

There are pros and cons of online classes,

and a lot depends on the subjects the students are taking. Some demand more field and practical work, and these would be unsuitable for distance learning.

Even Nepali students already abroad, cannot physically attend classes because of movement restrictions. Shantosh Lamichhane who is a third-year student pursuing Bachelors in Electrical Engineering at Victoria University in Melbourne is finding it difficult to study from home and work at the same time.

"My subject requires me to be in the lab most of the time, so it is difficult to restrict myself to online work," he explains. "I could have been more innovative with my classmates in the lab, and could explore more. Also it is unfair that I still have to pay full tuition fees."

In a bid to revive its in-person classes by September, Central European University in Vienna is trying its best to accommodate all incoming students focusing more on individual solutions. Austria has already eased its strict lockdown, and plans to welcome students with physical distancing and other precautions.

In a pre-orientation session in Zoom on Wednesday, József Laszlovszky, Director of the Cultural Heritage Studies Programme at Central European University confirmed to students that despite the ongoing global pandemic, the department will try to make classes more engaging online, and cut hourly lectures and initiate a creative way of learning to engage students from their home countries. Also, the university is open to accepting deferral looking at the global pandemic.

"We don't know what will happen in the next few months, but physically, digitally and intellectually, we'll try our best to help our students," said Laszlovszky.

Harvard University has also decided to resume its classes from the autumn, but is still weighing on the option of whether to do it online or in-person classes.

"All pre-orientation programmes were held online," Bhattarai told *Nepali Times*. "All those sessions were conducted at around midnight or early morning in Nepal. The time difference is not so feasible." 🇳🇵

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