

ACCA

Think Ahead

Take a step that takes your career places.

Go further.

Register now for £30 (save £49)

For registration scan the QR code

Great Opportunity

7,291 approved employers

Global Reputation

486,000 students and 200,000 members in 173 countries

Global Influence

Over 98 accountancy partnerships worldwide

Flexible Learning

Full-time, part-time, self-study options

Robust Support System

Student contact centre operating 24/7

# Green revival

World Environment Day on 5 June is being marked amidst a COVID-19 lockdown, offering Nepal a chance to ‘build back greener’.

The country can turn a new leaf on the economy, and reorient itself on a sustainable growth path by redirecting energy policy. Alas, Finance Minister Yubaraj Khatiwada’s budget last week was back to business as usual.

He hiked the tax on electric vehicles five fold, throwing a monkey wrench into any hope of a green growth model. (Page 5) At a time when the world is switching to electric transport, Nepal regressed to increasing fossil fuel use.

Cutting diesel and petrol consumption by even 10% would save the country Rs20 billion a year imports, use domestically generated electricity that would otherwise be wasted, reduce air pollution and improve public health. In

May alone, the Nepal Electricity Authority lost an estimated \$15 million in ‘spilled’ energy.

“As the government forges efforts to build back the economy amidst the coronavirus crisis, these are important times to think ahead and consider options that enable us to also build back greener and better,” says the World Bank’s country manager for Nepal, Faris Hadad-Zervos in a write up in this paper (page 12) on World Environment Day.

NEA chief Kulman Ghising had been pushing the Finance Ministry to reduce the tax on induction stoves, electric kitchen appliances and other plug-in devices. Khatiwada reduced the tax on Snicker and Mars bars, but not on equipment that could use Nepal’s surplus electricity.

There are other benefits to

reducing pollution. The main complaint tourists make about Nepal is about air quality in Kathmandu. Many young Nepali professionals list health hazards due to pollution as a big reason for emigrating.

The marked improvement in air quality in the past two months of lockdown showed it can be done. Switching to electric transport will not happen overnight, but enforcing emission tests would show immediate results. If breathalysers can stop drunk driving, police can easily extend that to testing and fining polluting vehicles.

However, Kathmandu’s air quality did not improve as much as expected, and one reason is brick kiln smoke as seen in photo (above) taken near Taudaha last month. The budget speech could

have subsidised viable alternatives like compressed stabilised earth bricks, or taxed the stacks right out of the Valley. But it didn’t.

The Bagmati can be turned into a river again by expediting the much-delayed drain network to divert sewage to land set aside in Chobar for a water treatment plant. The garbage problem can also be solved. Sixty percent of Kathmandu’s trash is still biodegradable and can be converted and sold as compost. Of the rest, most is plastic that can either be recycled, or reduced at source by enforcing past bans on single use plastic thinner than 30 microns.

This is not day-dreaming, all these measures are easily and quickly do-able. They just need political will that was sorely lacking in the Finance Minister’s budget speech. 🇳🇵

**Kunda Dixit**

Greenland Organic Farm

HIMALAYAN ARABICA COFFEE

Local and Fresh Roasted

Coffee

Cafe and Home Delivery

WhatsApp

98510 23082

fb/himalayanArabica

QR Code

CREATE YOUR "OWN" ENVIRONMENT

Divine Wines

Divine Wine

4L

For Trade Inquiry | Ph.: 01-4032624 | Mob.: 9801215111

wallpaper

AMBIENCE LIFESTYLE PVT. LTD

Bijuli Bazar, Naya Baneshwor, Kathmandu

Ph:4781 071,4781 072

Email: ambiencestyle@gmail.com

Hamro kitchen .com

WATER DISPENSER

HOT

HOT COLD

₹ 5,800 /-

₹ 7,800 /-

www.hamrokitchen.com | 01-4005253/4005254

Thuraya XT - Lite

Simple

Reliable

Affordable

Satellite Mobile Phone

CONSTITUTION

CONSTITUTION PVT.LTD.

Tel: 5549252

www.constellation.com.np

SN Joshi & Sons Company Pvt. Ltd.

USA. No. 1

Selling Mattress

ZINUS

New Arrival

Mattress in a Box

Available in: **caraz**

S.N. JOSHI & SONS COMPANY PVT. LTD

Lalitpur showroom: Patan Hospital Road, Lagankhel, Lalitpur, Tel: 5523864, 5540747, Fax: 552469

Chakrapath showroom: Narayan Gopal Chowk, Chakrapath, Kathmandu, Tel: 4016309

E-mail: sbfurniture@snjoshi.com.np

97718142610001



# UNLOCKDOWN

Nepal's leadership showed considerable audacity by declaring a national shutdown on 24 March as a circuit breaker after only the second confirmed coronavirus infection was detected.

Since the case load was so low, perhaps they thought it was only for a week or two. More likely, it was a kneejerk reaction, and the government had no idea the lockdown should only be the first step in a process leading to mass testing.

But they bungled that one, too, by trying to pull a fast one on fast-tracking test kits from China. Worse, it was getting the wrong kits – instead of ordering hundreds of thousands of PCR kits, it went for the unreliable RDT. Valuable time was wasted.



UNNATI CHAUDHARY

Although it should have anticipated a mass return of Nepali workers from India, we cannot really fault the government for the lack of preparedness at the border. Even the most efficient state apparatus would have been overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of returnees.

And given the sad state of infrastructure and service delivery capacity, it would have been foolish to expect a super-efficient quarantine-test-isolation protocol to be followed. Because of inequities in Nepal's skewed state structure, as in every disaster, it is the excluded, disenfranchised, the poor and voiceless who are suffering the most – those who depended on daily wages, migrant workers who have run out of cash and food, women and children, dialysis patients, maternity cases, and those with pre-existing ailments.

Nevertheless, what seems to be working reasonably well is that provincial and municipal government are taking charge, and despite the lack of resources and proper guidelines, are doing their best to deal with the sheer numbers of returnees.

Predictably, it is in Kathmandu where turf battles, lack of coordination and a reluctance to devolve decision-making and response to local governments has cost valuable time. Because of the delay in importing test kits, and the mystifying reliance on RDT, the number of tests per day is dropping.

There are nearly 5,000 swab collections daily for PCR testing, but only 1,000 can be

processed. Test machines are either broken, or have run out of RNA extraction. There are 3,000 samples in the queue to be tested, leaving people at quarantines in limbo for days. Private laboratories have the capacity to bridge the gap, but have been left out.

As we have argued in this space before, the lockdown has outlived its usefulness. Public health experts tell us there is no way to stop this virus unless there is a vaccine, we have to learn to live with it. The lockdown has unleashed mass job losses, increased suffering, and has contributed to thousands of preventable deaths from non-coronavirus diseases because of the lack of transportation and fear of infection in hospitals. Vaccination programs for children have been disrupted,

and the rate of suicides, domestic violence and rape have increased.

So far, most of the confirmed cases are from people returning from India and most hotspots are districts along the border as well in villages they have gone back to without being tested and spread it to the community. Ill-equipped and crowded quarantine centres have themselves become incubators for the coronavirus and other vector-borne diseases like dengue and malaria.

Kathmandu has belatedly decided that the best option now is to get local governments to enforce home quarantine for returnees, and only refer symptomatic cases to hospital isolation wards. But this means the

Ministry of Health must scale up testing so cases can be detected and isolated, especially since about 2,000 overseas Nepalis will soon start flying into Kathmandu airport every day before being taken to holding centres, tested and sent to home districts.

People are now beginning to defy the lockdown, and there is growing public opinion pressure on the government to relax rules. The Coronavirus Control and Management Committee headed by Defence Minister Ishwar Pokhrel is said to be looking at a 10-phase exit from the lockdown in the next three months.

For this the government is planning to follow the 'Georgia Model' allowing small businesses to open first, do 130,000 PCR tests a month, arrange for the safe return and transport of 300,000 Nepalis from overseas, and finally restarting domestic and international flights, and public transport.

The government had similarly relaxed restrictions in mid-April, but hastily clamped down again after confirmed cases spiked. This time, it is important that the new guidelines be clear, not enforced arbitrarily and public announcements on keeping safe distance and using masks.

Nepalis have generally obeyed the government's shelter in place rules so far, but their patience is running out.

**The lockdown has outlived its usefulness, it is time to get a move on**

## 10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Ten years ago this week, Nepali Times dedicated its entire issue #505 to mark World Environment Day. In many articles printed on the climate crisis and environment, the pressing issue even after 10 years in 2020 remain protecting and preserving the Bagmati River. The article titled Reviving the river chronicles the state of the holy river from Bagdwar to Taudaha. The situation continues to look bleak to this day. Nothing has changed. Excerpt:

The Bagmati River is an open sewer. The odour that assails one is proof of everything that has gone wrong with this metropolis: the exponential urbanisation, the lack of planning, haphazard growth and non-existent waste management.

"That flat area used to be paddy fields," says Hom Prasad Banskota, 83, pointing to Jorpati across the Bagmati from Gothatar heights. Now it is built over with new houses, not a shred of green fields is visible. Krishna Prasad Banskota, 73, blames democracy for the urban disarray: "We used to drink water from the river. Now, you can't stand the stink of the river."



Follow Nepali Times on Facebook  
Follow @nepalitimes on Twitter  
Follow @nepalitimes on Instagram

Publisher and Chief Editor: Kunda Dixit  
Digital Products Strategist: Sahina Shrestha, Associate Editor: Sonia Awale, Design: Kiran Maharjan  
Published by Himalmedia Pvt Ltd | Patan Dhoka, Lalitpur | GPO Box 7251 Kathmandu  
editors@nepalitimes.com | www.nepalitimes.com | www.himalmedia.com | Tel: 01-5005601-08 Fax: +977-1-5005518  
Marketing: Arjun Karki, Surendra Sharma rachanas@himalmedia.com  
Subscriptions: Santosh Aryal santosha@himalmedia.com  
Printed at Jagadamba Press | Production Plant: 01-5250017-18  
City Office: 01-5529210-11 | www.jagadambapress.com | sales@jppl.com.np



Times.com

## ONLINE PACKAGES



**VISITING NEPAL IN 2020?**

Nepal's sole aerial gateway is spruced up and adopts precautions as it prepares to receive passengers. Take a tour of the upgraded and improved Kathmandu airport, getting ready to welcome passengers after nearly three months of closure. Story: page 7.

### TAX HIKE ON EVS

This policy is drawn not for the good of the country but to serve the vested interest or out of total ignorance of the finance minister ('An electric shock to Nepal's energy future', Ramesh Kumar, page 5). It is no use lamenting government policy, conscious citizens need to take proactive steps to prevent the country from ruin. How about people withholding buying fossil fuel vehicle for the time being?

**Kin Bee**

■ The government should also implement road tax for pedestrians and issue licence for bicycles. Then oxygen and sunlight tax for all.

**Sundar Shrestha**

■ The rise in electric vehicle tax is in no way justified or makes sense in anyway: economically, socially or environmentally.

**Abarta Pandey**

■ It's like hammering nail into your own foot.

**Ruchi Saxena**

■ Lost opportunity for clean air and domestically produced hydroelectricity consumption.

**Rijesh Shrestha**

■ I think they raised the tax because of the petroleum mafia. We will be adding 1,300MW to the grid this year. Who will use that surplus electricity? What about decreasing trade deficit with India? What about our commitment to decrease carbon emissions?

**Ngima Sherpa**

■ This is all in cohort with mafia ('Nepal takes 3 steps back on e-cars', nepalitimes.com). Electric public transport should be encouraged.

**Lal Bahadur Nepali**

■ In Belgium and many other countries, people get extra discount from the government when buying electric vehicle. However, in Nepal...

**Rik Roels**

■ Such a bad move, instead of reducing tax on electric vehicles, they are increasing it. What will happen when Nepal starts producing excess electricity? More dollars will go out of country to buy petroleum products.

**Dipak Chamling Rai**

■ When the whole world is moving forward, Nepal government takes a step back. A little arm twist by India to sold out politicians of Nepal and these corrupt officials are back to selling their pride and Nepal's economy.

**Manish Shrestha**

### LOCKDOWN LIMBO

The government has no exit plan ('Lockdown = Breakdown', nepalitimes.com). It wasted 2 months doing nothing: no upgrading of medical facilities, no quarantine centres, no ramping up of PCR tests. That was the purpose of the lockdown, to prepare ourselves for the cases which were bound to rise. People are dying of hunger, thousands have lost jobs, and economy is at its worst. The government needs to wake up from its slumber

**Rishi Saraf**

■ Lockdown it self won't work unless proper check up and good quarantine practice is not set up. People in the border area are suffering and paying the price for the negligence of the government.

**Tsultrim Tenphel**

■ Quarantine centres have no good food, exercise or work, people will only be depressed ('Afraid of mean more than the virus', Unnati Chaudhary, page 10). Government needs to release people with no symptoms and allow them to self-isolate at home.

**Abhi Sharma**

## WHAT'S TRENDING



### Kathmandu airport gets facelift during lockdown

by Raju Banskota

Kathmandu airport has the dubious distinction of being voted as one of the world's worst airports. But passengers will be pleasantly surprised by improvements once Nepal's sole international gateway opens its doors after the COVID-19 lockdown is lifted. Read comments online.

**Most reached and shared on Facebook**



### An electric shock to Nepal's energy future

by Ramu Sapkota

The decision to increase the tax on electric vehicles five-fold has met with public outrage and a barrage of criticism from environmental groups. The e-car tax will increase dependence on imported petroleum and add to air pollution. Join the vibrant online discussion.

**Most popular on Twitter**

**Most commented**

**Most visited online page**

## QUOTE TWEETS

- Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
By raising taxes on #ElectricVehicles, the #budget had made a mockery of PM Oli's own declaration that 20% of vehicles in #Nepal would be electric by 2020. With this, the axe has fallen on the only hope to reduce #AirPollution& import bill for #petroleum
- Suchitra MG @Such\_77**  
A missed opportunity by a long shot
- Purushottam Mudbhary @MudbharyPuru**  
It's a pity that the PM says one thing and the budget of his government does the opposite. But, Mr Oli has said so many fantastic things without any intent or capacity to implement. Nothing new.
- Sajendra @Sajendr28425405**  
So discouraging, was thinking about buying EV but can't effort anymore
- Shreedhar Sapkota @shreedhar456**  
Dr Khatiwada should rethink this. We are planning to generate more electricity and yet they are imposing more tax on electric vehicle.
- Nirakar Pokhrel @unseenforces07**  
The power of mega cartels strikes again!!!

**Nepali Times @NepaliTimes**  
75-years-old Sukmaya Rai has 10 children & 27 grandchildren scattered across 5 continents. Yet none of them are with her at the time of #COVID19. Resettled in the US & separated from families, elderly Bhutanese refugees fight loneliness during #pandemic.

**Nimesh Dhungana @NimeshDhungana**  
Had the opportunity to work for/with Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, and also in the US. The 3rd country settlement may have given many material comforts but it's sad to be reminded of their enduring struggle to find peace, to keep their family together, made worse by the pandemic.

**नेपाली रञ्जन @koiralaranjan**  
Unfortunately, the reality of almost all the households in Nepal



# Where is Richard Morris?

The former British ambassador to Nepal has been missing near his home in UK for the past three weeks

Who would have thought it, such a nice, modest man. A quiet, measured man who would be astounded at all the fuss — police searches, global press and media swarming around his home in the pretty Hampshire village of Bentley.



**SO FAR SO GOOD**  
Lisa Choegyal

A polite, gentle, professional man commuting by train to the Foreign Office, due to start in July as High Commissioner to Fiji, and until last November, British Ambassador to Nepal. On 6 May at 1030am, Richard Morris took one of his regular runs into the Alice Holt Forest, a vast woodland that spreads between Hampshire and Surrey, and never reappeared, vanished.

Richard is unforgettable due to the distinctive port birthmark on his face. You could not ignore it or pretend it was not there, but the strange thing was that after the initial shock, his charm and intelligence trumped the wine stain on his cheek. You never noticed it ever again. We never talked about it, of course, but his sponsored long-distance running proceeds went to the Changing Faces charity of which he was an active trustee.

The weekend after they arrived in Nepal, we invited Richard Morris and his wife Alison to the *Doctor Strange* shoot in the heart of the earthquake damaged Patan Darbar Square. It was early November 2015 when we first met, before he had even presented credentials, surrounded by lights, cameras, extras and all the paraphernalia of a movie set.

I had arrived early and been startled to find myself standing next to the unpronounceable star of Kinky Boots, Chiwetel Ejifor at the crew's Himalayan Java coffee stand. He smiled shyly dressed in some outlandish medieval costume, swallowed his espresso, and stooped through the darbar's low lintel onto the set.

Working with the production, we brought a few select guests to watch the shoot and be thanked by the Hollywood team — the British Embassy had helped with handling the English stars on the Boeing charter, and a handful of ministers, generals and police chiefs without whom we could not have made it happen. The education ministry had rescheduled local exams in order to clear the palace precincts.

The Americans were super-supportive of the Disney Marvel razzmatazz featuring Nepal in a blockbuster, especially so soon after the earthquake devastation. The US Ambassador was there that day, her son having secured a leading role in a crowd scene. That same heady weekend David Beckham was kicking a football around in Bhaktapur for a UNICEF documentary.

The *Doctor Strange* logistics were complicated by blockade fuel shortages, hundreds of local actors, and police cordons sealing the Darbar Square as we had underestimated the rampant popularity of Benedict Cumberbatch. The lanky British actor turned out to have a huge fan base in Nepal, made



**NOT SO LONG AGO:** Ambassador Morris hosted the joint Brit-Kiwi 29 May 2018 party to celebrate Everest 65th with (left to right) New Zealand High Commissioner Joanna Kempfers, Late Minister Rabin Adhikari, Ghana Shyam Gurung WWF Nepal, and Gopal Upadhaya of ANNZA.

Richard Morris ran the Everest Marathon in 2019, raising funds for Changing Faces, a UK charity supporting people with visible difference on their face.

Ambassador Morris behind Prince Harry as he arrived at Kathmandu Airport in March 2016 a year after the earthquake.

famous as an enigmatic Sherlock in the classic television series. Ever since Benedict was first spotted in Pashupatinath, crowds had gravitated to the sets — Thamel, Indrachok, New Road, Swayambunath and now Patan.

Wandering over between takes to say hello to the waiting VIPs, politely corralled in a corner of the square admiring the action, Benedict passed a flagstone where he could be glimpsed by his followers from behind the guarded barriers, resulting in a chant of admiration: “Benedict, Benedict.” He paused, took a step back, and the fans screamed their appreciation. “Ah, I’ve found the Benedict stone!” he grinned, namaste-ing Richard as we weren’t allowed to touch his tramp-like makeover.

After the chaos of the shoot, I walked with Richard and Alison through the peaceful back streets of Patan, excited to see their fresh, first-time reaction to the temple shrines, concealed courtyards and hidden corners of the historic city. I showed them earthquake restoration sites and a couple of the Cosy Nepal homestays, meeting some of the innovative owners who introduced them to Newa heritage.

Richard and Alison’s tenure in Nepal was characterised by that engagement with local people at all levels, and admiration for the Valley culture. They endeared themselves to British expats by reviving the traditional Embassy carol service, even inviting us afterwards into their home for hot

rum punch and mince pies. Popular with Nepalis, their wide-ranging circles included Richard’s weekend jogging, running and marathon fraternity, unusual activities for Her Majesty’s representative. Alison, quiet and capable, managed the residence, endlessly entertained, book clubbed, and was a stalwart of the Cultural Studies Group of Nepal.

Richard was quick to offer help and got me out of a couple of tight spots. When our house was disrupted by post-earthquake renovation, we moved a long-standing dinner party of generous Hong Kong British philanthropists into his elegant Residence.

“It will be a pleasure, Lisa, no trouble at all,” he reassured me. That evening, relishing a fine dinner served by gloved waiters off silver platters, bone china and cut glass, I raised a silent toast to Richard in thanks down the acres of the polished mahogany dining table, beneath the steely gaze of the Queen’s portrait. On another occasion I returned the favour with an arrogant English public-school principal who arrived 45 minutes late for lunch without a word of apology to His Excellency.

“Would you mind popping by the office — I need a bit of advice on planning a rather important visit.” Normally we met on the pale sofas in the bay window of his home to evade the daunting security of the chancery building. This time I was relieved of my phone, hung with a guest pass, and ushered through the heavy security doors past the

rogue’s gallery of former heads of mission to the inner sanctum of the ambassadorial office. Kapindra nodded me through with a smile. “It’s still a deadly secret, no one knows except the foreign ministry, but you’ve handled so many royal visits over the years at Tiger Mountain and ...”

Prince Harry’s Nepal tour was a huge success, achieving world coverage and much glory for Richard. The bearded Prince was welcomed by five virgins, toured earthquake areas, and sat cross-legged with master woodcarvers in Patan palace, escorted by Rohit Ranjitkar of Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust and Pratima Pandey MBE of the Nepal Britain Society. Behind an unfriendly white picket fence, HRH met many of us one fine afternoon on the embassy lawn, before heading to the hills for some hands-on building-back-better.

Undoubtedly the most extraordinary and memorable event with Richard was one hot evening last May, the high Embassy windows spilling open onto the tented garden terrace. The New Zealand and British governments had jointly marked the 65th anniversary of climbing Mt Everest with an embassy reception on Sagarmatha Day 2018. It had been a jolly affair with an eclectic mix of government, diplomats, Gurkhas, Hillary and Tenzing Norgay family, tourism industry, mountaineers and media.

The Kiwi-Brit party on 29 May 2019 to celebrate Sir Ed Hillary’s

100th birth anniversary proved to be an even more riotous affair, and another huge success. Climbers back from Himalayan peaks drank the bar dry, Rt Hon Helen Clark (former prime minister of New Zealand and former head of UNDP) was chief guest on her way back from a Himalayan Trust trek in the Khumbu, and Nims Purja was there in the midst of his seemingly impossible speed summits during his Project Possible rampage, accompanied by a lovely long-suffering wife draped in a soft yellow sari.

But the undisputed star of that evening, exactly one year ago, was Ambassador Richard Morris, ruggedly bearded, hastily showered and just back by helicopter from completing the Everest Marathon that morning. A couple of years earlier we had choppered up to present the prizes in Namche, and Richard had thrilled the spectators by running a symbolic 8,848m. This time, he raced the entire gruelling 42km along the trail from basecamp to Namche after days of acclimatisation.

That same evening on the British Embassy veranda, never had any of us seen Richard so animated by achievement, flying high on pure adrenaline and total exhaustion. And that is how I like to remember our missing runner Ambassador, giving a masterly diplomatic performance, just back from Everest, tired and triumphant, and full of the joy of being alive. 🇬🇧



# Re-Cycling Kathmandu

One silver lining of the COVID-19 crisis could be that Kathmandu will move to being a cycle city

memory at the site to highlight cycle safety. A year later, an agreement was signed between the Department of Roads and a Chinese contractor responsible for expanding the Ring Road, which mentioned that cycle lanes would be constructed on both sides of Ring Road.

In June 2013, bicycle activists also made a model bicycle lane along the Ring Road at Thasikhel to demonstrate how it could be set aside within the green belt without cutting down trees.

The cycle lane was never built. The mural commemorating Pralad Yonzon was bulldozed to make way for all eight lanes of the new highway which were given over to cars. Today, the Ring Road is more dangerous than ever for cyclists and pedestrians.

Last week, at an interaction by the Nepal Cycling Society, the Director General of the Department of Roads promised that once the Chinese provide detailed designs for the second phase of Ring Road expansion, he would see to it that cycle lanes are included. Cyclists are hopeful but not convinced, promises have often been broken.

In 2009, a group of students started Kathmandu Cycle City 2020 campaign to turn the valley into a bicycle-friendly zone. Although bicycle activism has had some impact, overall the results are frustrating.

While campaigning in the 2017 elections, the mayor published a flyer promising to turn Kathmandu into a Cycle City. After he won, the city's Policy and Programs mentioned that a Cycle City master plan would be prepared and lanes set aside along the Bagmati corridor. But neither the master plan nor the cycle lanes ever materialised.

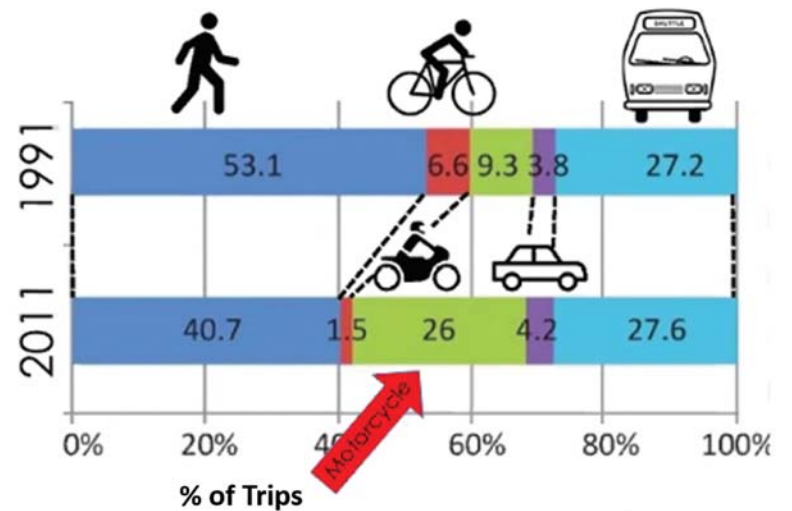
Last November, Lalitpur's Mayor launched the construction of 4.7 km of bicycle lanes in Patan and began by painting the Kupundol and Pulchok sections. The paint has now faded, and the contractor refuses to complete the work.

The initial action from Kathmandu and Lalitpur had encouraged bicycle activists to host the World Bicycle Forum in Kathmandu later this year. But due to COVID-19, even that has been cancelled.

The lockdown may, however, bring some good news to cyclists as cities around the world are now looking at bicycles as a safe mode of urban mobility. From London to Lima, hundreds of cities have been allowing pedal power to reclaim the streets.

Bicycles force people to maintain physical distance while taking minimum space on the streets. Cyclists do not touch too many surfaces. Physical exercise and clean air help keep the immune system strong. Even the UN is looking at bicycles as

## Travel Modal Share in Kathmandu 1991 vs 2011



Source: JICA/DoR, 2012

a driver of post COVID-19 green recovery. It is time for Kathmandu to take that leap as well.

Bicycle activists are once again raising their voices for a cycle-friendly city. Ratna Shrestha of the Nepal Cycle Society, says: "It is now or never."

He is frustrated with the lack of action in the past, but believes now is the time to make Kathmandu a Cycle City a reality. A silver lining

of the COVID-19 crisis may well be that Kathmandu will finally realise the dream of many to turn to a healthier and more sustainable form of transport. 🚲



**Bhusan Tuladhar** is an environmentalist and Executive Director of Sajha Yatayat. This is the second of a two-part series, the first part published last week dealt with future of mobility.



**PEDAL POWER:** Nepal's first bicycle shop in Kathmandu was the Pacnhanaryan Astanarayan in Jamal (above). The mural memorialising conservationist Pralad Yonzon at the site where he was killed in 2011 being demolished to make way for the eight-lane Ring Road in Balkhu. (below).



BHUSHAN TULADHAR

Bhusan Tuladhar

'Since 1925' reads the sign in front of Panc Bike in Jamal. The name of the store is a shortened form of 'Panchanarayan Astanarayan' the two early founders of the bicycle store.

But the history of bicycling goes even further to 1903, when some Ranis imported bicycles from India and rode them inside their palaces for pleasure, recalls Tirth Narayan Manandhar, the son of Astanarayan in his book *Kathmandu Then and Now*.

Over the past century, the bicycle has gone from being a leisure item for Nepal's nobility to a symbol of deprivation. Bicycles have been displaced by motorcycles and cars.

Between 1991 and 2011, the per cent of trips made on bicycles in Kathmandu decreased from 6.6 %

to 1.5%, while motorcycles almost tripled from 9.3% to 26% of all journeys. There are now more than 800,000 motorcycles in Kathmandu, and make up nearly 80% of the total vehicle fleet.

But bicycles have not disappeared completely, and may in fact be staging a comeback. Many young Kathmandu residents are taking up cycling, although mostly for recreation rather than for their daily commute. Most say they would happily pedal around in bicycles if the streets were safer.

With a mild climate and the average trip distance of 5km, Kathmandu Valley is an ideal cycling city. But bicycle use fell because of the lack of separate lanes, and worsening air pollution.

On 31 October 2011, conservationist Pralad Yonzon was killed by a truck on the Ring Road while bicycling home from work. Supporters painted a mural in his

## prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

### CREASION & Coca-Cola partnership

CREASION Nepal and The Coca-Cola Foundation have reached out to 160 waste workers and distributed protective jumpsuits and ration packages during the second week of the Waste Workers



Emergency Relief Project (WWERP). In addition, over 252 ration packages and 175 safety gear including protective jumpsuits, masks, and boots, were provided to waste workers across the valley in the past week.

### Annapurna climb anniversary

3 June marked the 70th anniversary of the successful ascent of Mt Annapurna by an expedition led by Maurice Herzog with nine other French mountaineers, the



first successful ascent of a 8,000 meter peak. Upon return, the mountaineers were received by Prime Minister Mohan Shumsher. As part of this commemoration, a series of photos have been put up online for display at the French Embassy's website.

### Etihad Airways

Etihad Airways has launched 'Etihad Wellness', an expanded and more comprehensive health and hygiene program and customer guide, building on the stringent measures already put in place by the airline to deal with COVID-19. Specially trained Wellness Ambassadors will provide essential travel health information and care under the programme. The initiative will be communicated through an easy-to-use online guide. Pertinent information is available at [www.etihad.com/wellness](http://www.etihad.com/wellness).

### Zonta Club AGM

Zonta Club Kathmandu hosted its 6th Annual General Meeting virtually on 31 May. The Club officially welcomed its incoming board for the 2020-2022 biennium, led by President Seema Golchha. Videos, presentations, and reports of Zonta's work on education, violence against women, campaign on ending child marriage and various advocacy and empowerment programs during the past year were presented in the meeting.

### NIC Asia

In light of the increased number of customers opening online bank accounts during the nationwide coronavirus lockdown, NIC Asia has made the process easier and more user-friendly. Customers using online banking services during the lockdown can get Rs500 cashback on their first transaction. In addition, customers can get a 30% discount on services provided by more than 2,500 hospitals, hotels, restaurants and department stores that have partnered with NIC Asia.



NEPAL  
WHEREVER  
YOU ARE.

Times.com

prabhu BANK



# An electric shock to Nepal's energy future

Hike in e-car tax will increase dependence on imported petroleum, add to air pollution

Ramesh Kumar

Nepal Finance Minister Yubaraj Khatiwada's announcement in his annual budget speech on 28 May to increase the tax on electric vehicles five-fold has met with public outrage on social media, and a barrage of criticism from environmental groups and proponents of renewable energy.

Khatiwada went against President Bidya Devi Bhandari's speech to both houses of Parliament last week in which she stated his own government's policy to promote electric transportation. In fact, Bhandari drove to Parliament in her recently acquired electric BYD.

The finance minister justified his decision in a post-budget press conference on Thursday saying: "Only expensive electric vehicles were being imported, and the existing subsidy only benefited a specific class of people, while the government lost tax revenue."

But electric vehicle importers said Khatiwada's statement was incorrect on many levels. In an interaction on Sunday, they said Nepal's middle class was finally able to afford to buy a car because of the subsidy and also because of the accumulated savings in fuel over the years. They said the foreign exchange outflow would actually increase because the hefty tax hike on electric cars would increase consumption of fuel and vehicle imports.

"I switched to importing small electric vehicles that motorcycle users could graduate to, and I based my decision on the government's tax subsidy on battery-powered cars. But this budget will now nearly double the price of the car, and it will be out of reach of the middle class that could finally aspire to owning a car," said one electric vehicle importer.

He added: "If there is no continuity in government policy, and there is such a dramatic policy departure no investor in their right mind is going to put money in Nepal."

Four years ago, the government had scrapped excise tax on electric vehicles, reduced import duty to only 10% and waived the annual Rs35,000 road tax on electric vehicles. The subsidies, and a new generation of battery technology that lowered cost and improved the range of electric vehicles, meant that sales took off. In the past year alone, 500 new electric cars have been sold in Nepal.

Now, the excise tax has been raised to 30-80% depending on the peak power capacity of the car, and the customs duty also to 80%. Although there is provision for 50% of the customs duty to be reimbursed and the tax on electric vehicles are still lower than for petrol or diesel cars, the higher price of electric vehicles means that they will now be much more expensive than a petroleum vehicle of similar size.

"In strictly cash terms a car that cost Rs 4million will now cost Rs 8million," says Umesh Shrestha of the Electric Vehicles Association of Nepal (EVAN). "This decision will undo a policy that had put Nepal far ahead of neighbouring countries."

One of the reasons manufacturers of electric vehicles like KIA and Hyundai had given Nepal priority for shipments even though the volume was small was because the tax subsidy made battery-powered cars competitive with petrol cars.

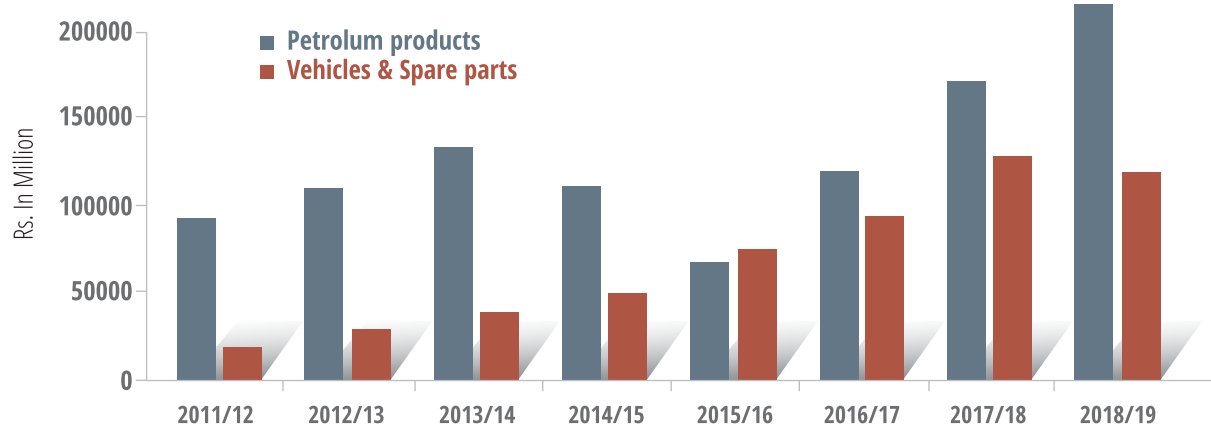
"We were able to convince manufacturers that Nepal was ready to go electric because of our hydropower potential and the tax



**PRESIDENTIAL STATEMENT:**  
President Bidya Devi Bhandari steps out of her electric BYD e6 limousine at Sital Niwas after an official function last year.

THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

## Nepal petroleum and vehicles imports



difference between electric and non-electric vehicles that proved there was strong government commitment to promote electric vehicles," explains Nirakar Shrestha of Laxmi Intercontinental which represents Hyundai in Nepal.

All this does not even take into account the improvement in air quality if even some of the diesel and petrol vehicles in Nepal's cities were replaced by battery-powered cars. The number one complaint of tourists on TripAdvisor and Lonely Planet is Kathmandu's air pollution.

Then there is the larger question of reducing Nepal's burgeoning petroleum imports from India (*see graph*) by switching even partly to electric vehicles. This would reduce the import bill, and use domestically generated hydroelectricity that is in danger of being wasted.

Kulman Ghising of the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) has been trying to urge the public to switch to electric cooking stoves and to buy electric cars to use up surplus hydroelectricity. NEA is more than doubling its current generation capacity by adding another 1,300MW of hydropower in the coming fiscal year.

The government's decision to raise taxes is expected to drive people away from electric vehicles, and could not have come at a worse time. Especially during the current lockdown, Nepal's electricity supply

has outstripped demand. As a result, hundreds of megawatts are unused and wasted.

Of the 1,300MW currently produced, peak consumption has dropped to 700MW, with night time consumption as low as 450MW. A lot of the energy produced is therefore 'spilled'. With no notable change in demand and with supply doubling, much more energy will be wasted and NEA will lose money on every wasted watt.

Meanwhile, the US-funded Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) project is stuck because of infighting between factions in the ruling Nepal Communist Party, the transmission lines that were supposed to evacuate power from new power-plants in central Nepal to meet growth in urban demand and even export to India may now not materialise.

Ghising had been publicly appealing to the government to introduce policies that encouraged electricity consumption, including reducing the tax on electric appliances, increasing electric vehicle ownership and investing in fast-charging stations along the highways. But Finance Minister Khatiwada last week did just the opposite.

"The government's decision is dangerous from financial, environmental and energy standpoints," says environmental activist Bhushan Tuladhar.

Two factors have been cited as

reasons behind the decision to hike taxes on e-vehicles: a weakening of the government's revenue base as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown, and its reliance on taxation of fuel in order to meet its expenditure. A

third factor could be lobbying by the country's powerful fossil fuel mafia.

"It was not economically justifiable that fuel-based cars paid 300% in taxes and luxury electric vehicles were exempt," argued Finance Secretary Shishir Kumar Dhungana.

But environmentalists have accused the government of backing down from its own international commitments as well. The Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport had laid down goals for the electrification of transport in its 'Nationally Determined Contribution' to meet global targets for the reduction of carbon emissions and the 'National Action Plan for Electric Mobility' in 2017.

Some of the goals set included a 20% electrification of transportation by 2020 and reducing fossil fuel dependence in the transport industry. The tax on electric cars directly contravenes these commitments, and goes against everything the government stood for in the past four years. 🇳🇵

**HEALTH AT HOME**  
*your health partner!*

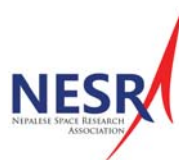
- Nursing Services and Placement
- Doctors Visits and Procedures
- Physical Therapy and Rehabilitations
- Diagnostics (Blood, Urine, ECG, USG etc.)
- Equipment Sales and Rental
- Prescription drugs delivery
- Appointments Management

**Taking Quality Healthcare to people's doorstep.**

+977- 9818360166 [www.healthathome.com.np](http://www.healthathome.com.np)



## VIRTUAL EVENTS


**Space4Women Webinar**  
 The Nepal Space Research Association's webinar "Insights from Women in Space"

will feature distinguished women in the space sector who will share their experiences as they pursued a career in STEM. Register for the webinar at the NSRA Facebook page.

5 June, 5pm

**Books beyond borders**

Join readers across South Asia for a book reading and discussion session of 'How to Win Friends and Influence People' by Dale Carnegie from. Head to the Quixote's Cove Facebook page to register for the event and get a digital copy of the book.

June 8

**KIMFF 2020 submissions**

Fill the KIMFF 2020 entry form and send relevant films directed or produced in the last two years. Go to the website for more details.

Deadline: 1 September


**Theatre for children**

Keep children occupied while doing something productive. Enrol them children for an online theatre course for children aged 6-8. Classes will take place once a week on Sunday. Go to Sushila Arts Academy's Facebook page for details.

June 4 onwards, 9860588626

## photo.circle

**photo.circle grants**

photo.circle is providing 10 grants to support Nepal-based Nepali photographers, journalists and multimedia storytellers to document the COVID-19 pandemic. Stay tuned for the deadline of the 2nd cycle of applications. Head to the website for details on how to apply.

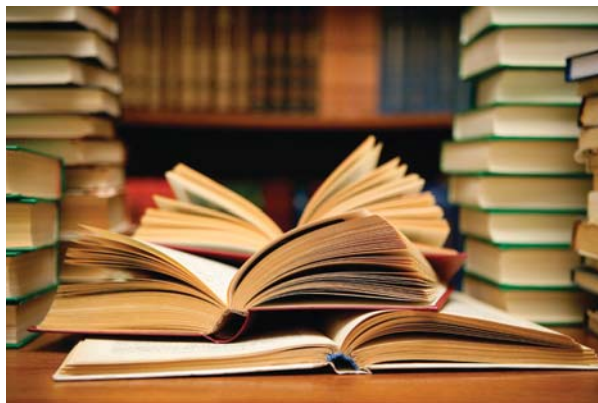
## ONLINE ARCHIVES


**Journeyman Pictures**

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

**Nepal Literature Festival**

Listen to Nepali literary figures, artists, political figures, and people in the public eye talk about the Nepali literature landscape. Head on to YouTube and start from the 2019 festival.


**LibriVox**

Not a reader? Download and listen to audiobooks of thousands of novels and poetry in the public domain, read by volunteers from all over the world.


**Khan Academy**

Looking for educational material as a student or educator? Find necessary academic material for any subject from basic arithmetic to art and history on Khan Academy's website, or head to YouTube for multimedia resources.


**Access Mars**

Take a virtual trip to Mars. NASA partnered with Google to offer a tour of a 3D replica of the surface of Mars recorded by NASA's Curiosity rover.

## QUARANTINE DINING

**PIANO B**

Taste the best of Italy with PIANO B's pasta, lasagne, calzones, and more. Head to Facebook and choose from the menu.

Delivery: 12pm-6:30pm


**Doko Deli**

Look at the menu on Facebook and take a pick from a variety of appetisers, pizzas, and pasta. Try the Mustang *ko Piro Aloo*.

9869188070, 9848997461


**Bota Momo**

Head on to Foodmandu and order all things momo from Bota's menu. Or give the spicy vegetable or chicken noodles a try.

Delivery: 12pm-4:30pm


**Baskin Robbins**

Nothing beats ice cream on hot summer afternoons in lockdown. Baskin Robbins Facebook page has picked from a variety of flavours, sundaes, and ice cream cakes. Foodmandu will also deliver.

Delivery: 10am-6pm, 9801151597

**Cafe de Tukche**

Tired of trying to figure out what to cook for lunch day after day? Get authentic Thakali food delivered from Cafe de Tukche. Order the Thakali *Khana* set, or take a break from rice and try the Thakali *Dhedo* set instead. Check out the menu on Facebook.

Lazimpat, 9828937500


**QATAR**  
 AIRWAYS القطرية

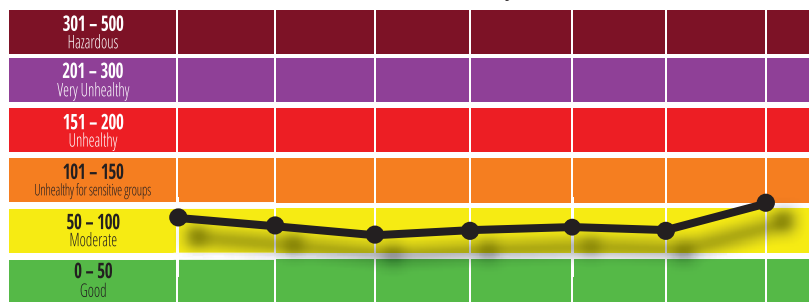
Going places together - [qatarairways.com](https://qatarairways.com)



This is a satellite radar image of Cyclone Nisarga hitting India's west coast, the second major storm to hit the Subcontinent in a month. This system is drifting northeastwards and will slam into the Himalaya scoring a direct hit on Nepal on Friday and into the weekend. Expect heavy precipitation, strong wind and snow at higher elevations. This is not the monsoon, though, that is still at least 3 weeks away.


**AIR QUALITY INDEX**

KATHMANDU, 29 May - 4 June



Kathmandu Valley's Air Quality Index is getting slightly better, except crossing the AQI 100 mark once or twice during the week. But the daily average remained in the Yellow Moderate band every day except Thursday. The lockdown is still having an effect, but the reason particulate concentration has not gone down despite the lack of vehicles is because the brick kilns on the outskirts of the city have started being fired up, and there is a lot of open garbage burning. Lack of motorcycles means the ozone levels have been good throughout the past month.

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

**ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI**

KRIPA JOSHI



Glass is fully recyclable but we can save even more energy by reusing glass bottles and jars. Glass containers are perfect for reuse because they are long-lasting, durable and corrosive resistant. They are also made from nontoxic raw materials and have almost zero rate of chemical interaction. You could reuse glass bottles and jars to store food or stationary, turn them into flower vases or candle holders and even decorate them into artistic creations.

**OUR PICK**


A Japanese organising consultant, Marie Kondo has received immense adulation for her hit reality television series—*Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*. Released on Netflix worldwide in 2019, the series hovers around Kondo visiting different families and helping them organise and tidy their homes using her KonMari method. The eight-episode reality series has Marie Iida who acts as Marie Kondo's interpreter throughout the show.

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



# Kathmandu airport gets facelift during lockdown

**Nepal's sole aerial gateway is spruced up and adopts precautions as it prepares to receive passengers**



The newly-paved runway at Kathmandu airport, which has now been extended by 300m at the southern end.

ALL PHOTOS: MANISH PAUDEL

Raju Banskota

Kathmandu airport has the dubious distinction of being voted multiple times as one of the world's worst airports. It has got consistently bad reviews for crumbling infrastructure, delays due to congestion, long lines at immigration and customs, and rude staff.

But passengers will be pleasantly surprised by improvements in the terminal buildings and the facilities once Nepal's sole international gateway opens its doors after the COVID-19 lockdown is lifted.

Nepal's lockdown is into its tenth week and has been extended till 14 June and both domestic and international flights are grounded till midnight of 30 June. But the airport authorities have used the time to give the facility a facelift.

"We have expanded the parking, extended the runway, added and upgraded the space in both the international and domestic terminals, and have them conform to WHO guidelines for physical distancing and other coronavirus prevention measures," says Tribhuvan International Airport Director General Devendra KC.

The runway length has been

extended by 300m at the 02 southern end, allowing heavy jets to take off without any load penalty for long-range flights. New runway and approach lights have been installed, the parking aprons enlarged to accommodate 15 planes at a time from the nine previously, the taxiways have been resurfaced.

The much-delayed expansion of the international terminal is also nearly complete with a new pre-departure sterile area that can accommodate up to 1,500 passengers at a time. The arrival immigration hall has been upgraded, and painted circles on the floor ensure that passenger maintain a minimum distance while queueing up.

After customs, passenger will now no longer have to walk down a steep hill to get to the vehicle parking and public transport, a new concourse and escalator takes them down to the lower level where passengers can be received.

Some of these facilities are already being used for repatriation flights for foreigners stranded in Nepal by the lockdown over the past two months.

"We hope that the facilities will now be much more passenger friendly, and there will also be less congestion once the lockdown is lifted," says airport spokesperson



Most planes have now been parked for two months after being grounded on 24 March.

Dipendra Shrestha, who took a dozen journalists on a tour of the facilities on Sunday.

The airport was keen to show that it was prepared for operations during the pandemic, and had ensured physical separation of 1m between passengers and between them and immigration and customs officials.

Despite the runway upgrade, however, the airport has not yet

extended the taxiways to the ends of both runways that would have cut the time between flights and reduced congestion. Because of terrain, Kathmandu is a one-way-in-one-way-out for bigger jets, and taxiway extension would have allowed planes to land and takeoff more frequently, shortening the holding time.

When the airport opens, passengers will have to get in

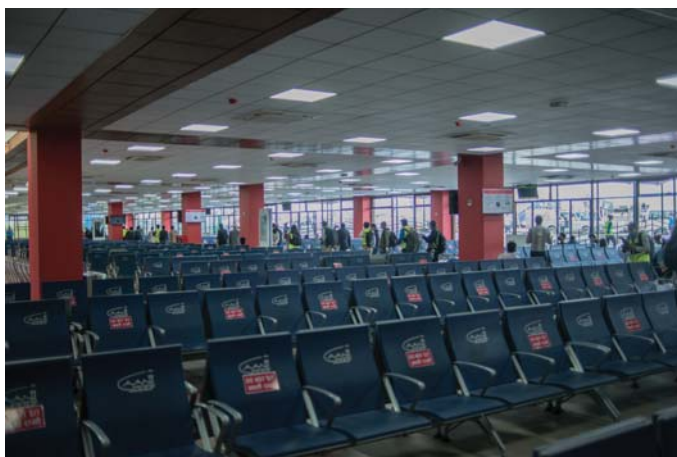
three hours before their flights because of the delays caused by the new COVID-19 prevention procedures. The airport will also have a quarantine centre for incoming passengers who have a temperature or symptoms. 🇳🇵

[nepalitimes.com](https://nepalitimes.com)

Go online for photo gallery and video.



Floor markings ensure that passengers queuing up at immigration maintain at least 1m distance.



The expanded sterile area in the departure concourse now has a capacity for 1,500 passengers at a time.



The extension of the arrival area is more spacious and allows smooth transfer to waiting cars and transport.

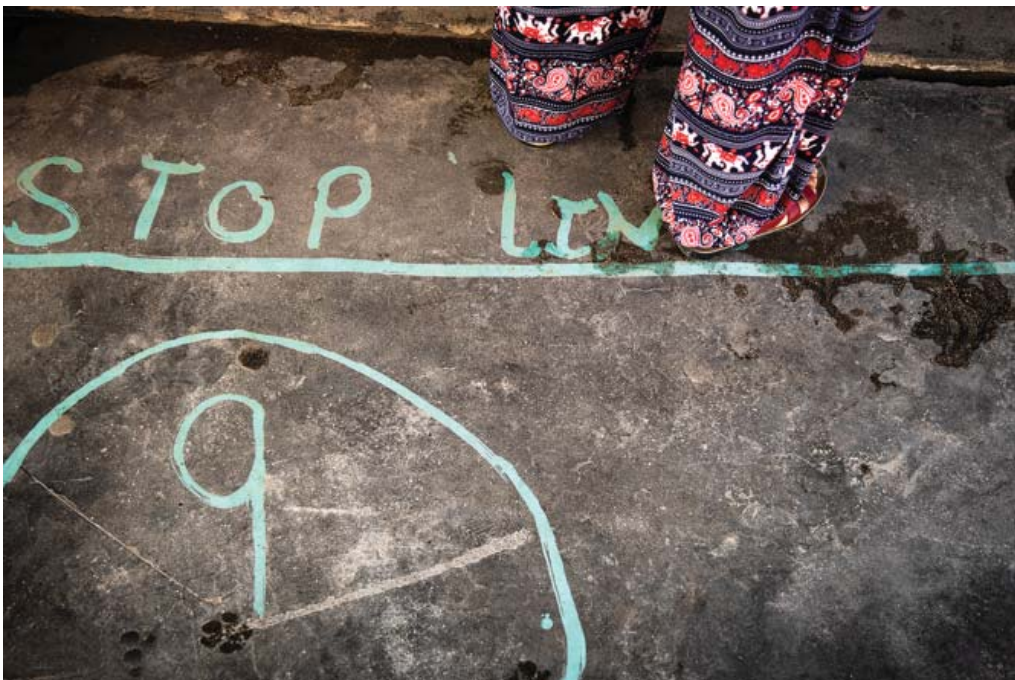




# Keeping our hearts open in a lockdown

How a private initiative kept helping fellow-Nepalis in need during the COVID-19 closure

ALL PHOTOS: GARY WORNELL



**CORONA CHRONICLES:** (clockwise) A cow rests in the shade in an underpass near Kalanki in Kathmandu during lockdown.

Rewati Gurung from Kokroma with Wangchung Raptan Lama receiving masks for a donation program in Kathmandu during lockdown.

Physical distancing at a shop in Ramhiti during lockdown.

number of people in Nepal rely on day to day income, and the impact of lockdown is evident in the long queues of people in communities around the city receiving daily prepared meals by youth organisations, religious institutions and private individuals.

For Gurung, the lockdown provided an opportunity to take time to assess the potential impact on her business. Well stocked with raw material from the prison, and already in the planning stages of product development, she gave her staff two weeks paid leave and set about pattern making for new products to be made when lockdown ended.

By continuing to work from home, and proactively working on new designs, looking toward an uncertain future, she maintained a positive attitude. By keeping up to date on the global situation, and the evidence from WHO that face masks were helping to prevent the spread of the disease, Gurung realised that she could make a positive contribution in the early stages of the pandemic by shifting her production from baby clothing to masks. At the end of the two weeks, she was geared up for production with the first order of 1,500 destined for shipping to the USA on a repatriation flight from Kathmandu.

Through her social media channels word got around, and in the last six weeks she has shipped more than 6,000 cotton masks to NGOs, religious institutions, children's homes and private individuals in Nepal. She has received donations from abroad and also donated directly from Kokroma's profits to those in need in her community. Her staff are fully employed and working from home, staying safe and delivering completed masks once a week to the office. Just eight weeks ago this would have seemed impossible.

No other situation has provided the kind of insight into the potential beauty of this city than this lockdown. The views of the snow covered Himalaya are the very ones that the tourists dream of seeing when they land at Kathmandu airport.

As the country settles into another month of lockdown, the jacaranda trees burst into bloom like silent fireworks and paint pale blue indigo patterns as they fall on the empty streets below. 🇳🇵

**Gary Wornell** is a Canadian permanent resident of Finland, author of the book *Treasure of Nepal* and a photojournalist. He has been in Nepal since 2013.

 [nepalitimes.com](http://nepalitimes.com)

Go online for photo gallery



GARY WORNELL

Early in February 2020 I left Kathmandu for a five week work trip to Europe at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic had registered less than 30,000 cases worldwide. It was becoming more of a news item, but in Europe there were only a handful of cases, and it seemed at the time that there was little to be concerned about. I transited through seven international airports, that would eventually bring me back to Nepal on 12 March, just two days before Nepal stopped issuing visas on arrival to visitors 12 May.

By the time I arrived in Nepal, worldwide cases had jumped to 130,000 and at Tribhuvan International Airport I was stunned to see a virtually empty arrival hall with just one luggage belt operating. The impact of COVID-19 was clearly being felt. I was happy to be back, but had a nagging feeling that Nepal would be facing more tough times ahead. Having read more about the asymptomatic transmission of the disease, I self-quarantined in my apartment in Boudha, except for brief visits to a local baby clothing project near where I live.

In 2015 I experienced the earthquakes of 25 April and 12 May. In the days that followed I became acutely aware of the impact that events of that magnitude can have

on a developing country poorly equipped to handle widespread loss of life, the destruction of homes, schools and heritage sites, not to mention the stress on remote communities largely cut off from urgently required support.

It was the efforts of individuals and youth groups that caught my attention at the time, proving to me that with few resources at hand, the willingness to serve the community was deeply ingrained in the Nepali psyche. While the government was struggling under the enormous weight of implementing disaster recovery, I witnessed a remarkable effort by these highly motivated young people to do whatever they could to bring medical aid, food and provisions for temporary shelter to all of the affected districts.

That disaster was visible, and the need was clear. This was an invisible virus. As a photojournalist from Finland and armed with a press pass, I ventured out on my scooter in the following days to record the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown. Police and army checkpoints were everywhere. The streets, once bustling with cars, bikes and pedestrians were ominously empty.

During the earthquakes of 2015, a close friend and colleague, Rewati Gurung, had implemented two relief projects on her own initiative from her home near Boudha. The first of these provided tea and eggs to two hospitals in Jorpati over a ten day

period immediately following the disaster, and the second focused on providing new school bags filled with books, pencils, and sandals to thousands of school children in remote communities worst affected by the earthquakes. The project is now five years running and continues to address the needs of school children in remote areas of the country.

In the summer of 2015, Gurung, a development studies researcher by education, attended Helsinki University Summer School on the theme 'Gender, Culture and Politics', exposing her to a variety of successful Finnish initiatives that have made a significant impact on Finland's social welfare system.

Inspired by the story of the Finnish maternity package provided by the government to all mothers on giving birth, Gurung started her own commercial enterprise in early 2018 – Kokroma, making baby clothing and accessories from 100% cotton woven by Nepali prisoners and sewn by women in her neighbourhood in Kathmandu. Gurung's aim was to create a unique brand with raw materials sourced from Nepal in a market saturated with cheap imports from China and India. In the last two years I have seen Kokroma grow, attending dozens of promotional and networking events focused on supporting startups in Kathmandu.

For many entrepreneurs, the sudden loss of income has been catastrophic. A significant



# Lockdown brings out the best in Nepalis

Youth volunteer groups and charities spring into action to help those in need

Alisha Sijapati

Since the announcement of a nationwide lockdown ten weeks ago, Ajay Kurmi has been working nearly non-stop every day. He gets up before dawn and with the help of other young volunteers prepares and distributes meals for those in quarantine. It is late at night when he gets to bed.

Kurmi works with Sano Paila in Birganj which had been mobilising young Nepalis to help with rehabilitation, relief and rescue even before the lockdown. But for the past two months Sano Paila, which means ‘small step’, has launched the Feeding Nepal program to provide proper meals to the displaced, stranded and those in quarantine in Birganj, Janakpur, Siraha and even the Karnali region of western Nepal.

The number of Nepalis who have tested positive for the virus has exceeded 2,300 with 200 new cases daily, and there have been a total of nine deaths. Most of the positive cases have been along border districts among recent returnees from India. But the virus is now spreading in communities in the hinterland.

There are currently 156,000 people in quarantine centres all over the country, and the facilities are basic without adequate food and water. Sano Paila provides four meals a day at quarantine centres, but is also feeding hospital workers, daily wagers, and displaced people.

“This needs sustained effort, it is not a one-off help. The need is great, but every small step helps,” explains Jai Kumar Sah at Sano



Paila in Birganj which is offering meals to 300 families a day, including for Dalit families who have lost their source of income after the lockdown. In Siraha (pictured), Sano Paila provides two meals a day to 2,810 people every day. Its four-meal menu includes: rice, fruits, lentils, vegetables and a meat dish.

Other non-profits have also re-channeled their efforts to lockdown relief work. In Dhanusha, the Mithila Wildlife Trust, which is involved in biodiversity conservation through community forestry, has redirected its effort to help families in distress in 15 districts in Province 2 and beyond.

With support from the UK-based charity Chora Chori, it is helping families in Dhanusha, Sunsari, Saptari, Bara, Siraha, Mahottari, Rautahat, Sarlahi, Parsa, Makwanpur, Nawalparasi, Kapilvastu, Chitwan and Butwal.

“We are trying to reach the unreached, and are getting calls for help from the Musahar, Dome, Chamar, Tatma, Khatbe, and Chepang, Dhangar and Dalit

communities,” says Dev Mandal of Mithila Wildlife Trust which has distributed food to last two weeks at a time for 1,800 families.

The Trust’s package includes 15kg of rice, 3kg of lentils, 2litres of cooking oil, 2.5kg of onion, 1kg of potato, 1kg of soybean, 1kg salt, and two bars of soap. It augments the package with beans, eggs and fruits to meet the needs of the most vulnerable even within these groups like pregnant women and infants.

Both Sano Paila and Maithili Wildlife Trust have faced their own share of hardships, and the foremost among them is funding. Since feeding the vulnerable population is an ongoing effort, and families have lost their sources of income, it need continuous support.

While Sano Paila is raising funds through word of mouth and social media, Mithila Wildlife Trust benefits from Chora Chori’s community worldwide for funds.

Another group that has benefited from international crowdsourcing is BlinkNow, a charity started by American Maggie Doyne of Kopila School in Surkhet. When

thousands of families from the Karnali returning from India were not allowed to enter the province without a certificate showing they are coronavirus-free, the charity sprang into action to help families camped by the highway with food, water, shelter and got the local government to organise tests so they could travel to their home districts.

In Birganj, Sano Paila’s Jai Kumar Sah says that if the lockdown is extended, the funding situation will be precarious: “We are working on distributing relief food through our reserve funds at the moment, and we will surely need more help in the future, if the lockdown continues to extend we will have a problem. People here are now defying the lockdown rules.”

Dev Mandal in Dhanusha says funds are always short since the need is so great, but the Mithila Wildlife Trust is managing for now with a lifeline of support from Chora Chori.

“If the lockdown ends by 14 June, we will be in a much better place in terms of funding and transportation of relief distribution, but if it is extended it will be big challenge to keep up our feeding program.”

The volunteers continue to work despite the risk of infection for themselves, and they also have to fight stigma from neighbours for helping those in quarantine after contact tracing.

Says Sah: “We are living and working among those who are at risk, and have not done tests ourselves. We are using precautions and protective gear, but one never knows.” 🇳🇵

## Most vulnerable among the vulnerable

Many people with disabilities who are already marginalised in Nepal are facing problems dealing with the COVID-19 lockdown, but are getting help from community volunteers. The disabled find it difficult to access the government’s public health messages about staying protected from the virus, there is difficulty in getting treatment at hospitals and travelling around because of the lockdown.

To meet their needs, the British aid group VSO has mobilised 400 community volunteers in Sarlahi, Parsa and Banke districts of the Tarai to reach more than 2,000 people with disabilities to tailor health advice and other support.

One group with specific needs are the deaf and hard of hearing, many of whom may not have attended school and so find the radio and tv public service announcements about the virus are inaccessible to them. VSO volunteers have developed Nepali sign-language resources with important information about how to stay safe during the pandemic.

The restriction on movement during the prolonged lockdown adds to the challenge for volunteers to reach those who need their help - but VSO’s network of community-based volunteers solves this problem. These ‘Big Sisters’ are recruited and trained from within the community, and so live alongside those who they support, and can deliver the sign-language information. The Internet is used where available, and specially adapted SIM cards for people with hearing difficulties and speech impairments when it is not.

“I was scared when I heard about this virus and was afraid thinking what will happen if it’s spread here. But we received messages from a Big Sister working in the community in sign language so that I could better understand the risks around the virus and how I can protect myself and stop the spread,” says Anguri from Sarlahi.

Priyanka has speech impairment, and says: “I have learnt that to be safe from the virus we should not go outside and should wash our hands with soap and water.” One of the volunteers is Pooja Regmi, 21, who has been working on making sign language videos to create awareness about the virus. “I have seen the difficulties faced by deaf people as a daughter of parents with hearing impairment. The first thing that came to my mind when I heard about the pandemic is making sure deaf people were aware of the coronavirus and government messages,” she says.



TATA MOTORS  
Connecting Aspirations

TATA

REFLECTS SAFETY IN ALL WAYS

TATA NEXON, THE SAFEST SUV



★★★★★

GLOBAL NCAP

5 STAR SAFETY RATING

\*Conditions Apply





ALL PHOTOS: UNNATI CHAUDHARY

# “Will we ever make it home?”

Hungry and tired, mothers arrive with babies by the thousands at the Indian border

Unnati Chaudhary  
in Kailali

After travelling for two days from Delhi, Manisha Chunara arrived on 30 May at the border in Gauriphanta. Stepping on Nepali soil, she was wracked by two emotions: happiness at being home, and worry about her children who had not eaten properly for two days.

“They have been hungry ever since we left Delhi, there were no shops open along the way,” says Manisha, who is among the

average 5,000 Nepalis crossing just this one border post every day after it was opened ten days ago.

Kailali district administration says one third of them are women – mostly young mothers with children, and all have similar stories. While some have husbands with them, many others are travelling just with their children.

Kamala Saud returned from Mumbai after a 3-day journey with her 10-month baby. She is tired and hungry, and says she was unable to breastfeed her child throughout the journey.

Kamala’s ordeal is not over, she now needs to find her way to her village of Bannigadi of Accham district, but has neither money nor food for the 24 hour journey. There are some buses, but they are charging up to Rs8,000 for the journey. “Will we ever make it home?” Kamala asks, cradling her baby in the oppressive mid-day heat.

Hungry, tired and hot in the 40 degree heat of the plains, the returning families are also fearful they may catch the coronavirus from the thousands of others crowding the bus station.

The local government appears to be overwhelmed by the numbers, but there are some local volunteers that have begun to distribute food and water to those arriving at the border. Women are also being given dignity bags with sanitary pads and babyfoods.

Most of the women are from Farwestern Province, and do not have far to go after they cross into Nepal. But many are from Karnali Province and have been desperate to find transport, and even if they find a bus they have to have enough cash to pay the exorbitant fares. ■

## Afraid of men more than the virus

Arati Rawal, 27, travelled for a week to reach the Nepal border from Delhi on 21 May. But the border was sealed and the Indian police sent her to a quarantine centre in Paliya.

She was so desperate to get home, she fled and sneaked into Nepal walking 12 hours through paths in the jungle.

“I was so happy to be in Nepal, but that happiness did not last long,” said Arati, who was taken by Nepal Police to a female only quarantine centre in Dhangadi. “There are women police in the daytime, but at night there are male police and we never go out.”

Arati looks frail from her ordeal of hitchhiking through India and walking across the border. But she is also stressed because back home her neighbours have spread rumours that she has come back with coronavirus and have ostracised her family.

Lying on the floor next to Arati is Sarala Rathor who has a two-year-old baby and was on her way to her parent’s home in Nepal



The business community in Dhangadi has stepped in to provide women returnees with dignity bags.

when the lockdown sealed the border. She did finally enter Nepal but has been kept in the detention centre.

“It is difficult here,” she sighs. “We get to eat

a simple meal only at 2pm, it is not enough for me and I have stopped lactating so the baby is always hungry.”

Both Arati and Sarala understand that

the authorities have created a separate quarantine for women returnees, but say there is nothing here that women need. There are no sanitary pads available, and some women have run out of contraceptive pills.

The night-time patrols by police instead of being reassuring frightens the women in the quarantine, and they say it feels more like a concentration camp. The quarantine centre is a converted college building and has 12 women and three children. It is one of 30 quarantine centres in Dhangadi Municipality which have 688 returnees from India, 79 of them women and 19 children.

Deputy Mayor Sushila Mishra said it was difficult enough to set aside a separate quarantine for women, and she is trying to coordinate with the police to have women guards at night. The fear among women is fanned by the fact that the perpetrators of the widely-publicised rape murder of a young student in Dhangadi has still not been

resolved even after three years.

The business community in Kailali has started handing out dignity bags for women returnees at the border with basic necessities. But the facilities in Kailali do not meet even the minimum standards in the government’s own guidelines which require quarantine centres to have medical officers, health checks every day, two main meals and two snack packets a day. They are also supposed to have an ambulance on call, adequate water and sanitation and beds at least 3m apart.

Anita Joshi, 30, also returned from India and is worried that her ten-year-old son is not eating anything. “I will probably be sick not because of the virus but because of the lack of food,” she says.

As India relaxes its lockdown and train services restart, the number of Nepali workers returning from India has risen to 5,000 a day, and a third of them are women.

Unnati Chaudhary





One set of returnees from India waiting for the jeep to take them on the final leg of their journey home.



These Nepali workers finally got home to Musikot after an arduous journey from India, and are now quarantined in a local school without proper sanitation and water.

# Nepal quarantines are hotspots for disease

Western Nepal may be seeing spike in COVID-19 as returnees from India head home without tests



Nepali returnees from India lining up at Karwang checkpoint before being sent to Baglung and Gulmi.

ALL PHOTOS: KAMAL PAUDEL



The municipality in Musikot has converted this local school into a quarantine for Keshab Ghimire and his wife who returned after medical treatment of their son.



Quarantined in a school in Thamdada of Gulmi after spending many weeks returning from India, these migrant workers, like many others, never got a health checkup or a COVID-19 test.

Ramu Sapkota in Gulmi and Kamal Paudel in Baglung

Nepal's new budget has allocated Rs12 billion to improve healthcare facilities, that is money urgently needed in western Nepal where the public health infrastructure remains fragile to the point that school buildings have been used as risky makeshift quarantine centres.

Here in Gulmi and Baglung districts, the classrooms serving as quarantine centres are used to isolate Nepalis who have returned from India after losing their jobs. Many lack proper medical equipment, food, drinking water and sanitation facilities.

Some are so crowded that they are incubators to the virus themselves. Despite government directives to ensure proper quarantining measures, none have been implemented so far in these makeshift centres.

For example, the guidelines stipulate that every 100 people in quarantine must have at least one doctor, one nurse and one paramedic. They must get health checks twice a day to see if they have fever, and should be referred to hospitals if they develop symptoms.

Saraswati Secondary School in Musikot of Gulmi has 18 returnees who have been isolated since 28 May after harrowing journeys across India and waiting for weeks at the sealed border. They do not

have proper beds, or mosquito nets, cannot always maintain distance.

"We have to share the same tap and dirty toilets. We have to sleep on the floor and need families to bring us food and water," says Govinda Bhattarai, who returned from Hosiarpur in India after losing his job.

Not all have returned from India, some who have come from Kathmandu are also in quarantine. Like Keshab Ghimire, his wife and nine-year-old son who had returned after medical treatment in Kathmandu and were put in isolation in a school. There are no facilities, no health personnel, they have had to bring mattresses from home and they cook by themselves in the converted classroom.

Only a few of the returnees had their temperatures checked, and none have had PCR tests, leading to fears that the centre could be a hotbed for COVID-19 transmission. The only thermal gun available does not work anymore, and the few Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) are being washed and reused.

"The municipality has not sent medical professionals or security people," says Bishnu Prasad Kharel, a teacher who has to monitor the school's quarantine. "Those in isolation could escape if they wanted to, and that would pose a risk to the community."

Kharel also says the lack of support from the municipality has forced people to take matters into their own hands. "We have no expertise in quarantine

management and we lack logistical support from the municipality," he adds.

In the same municipality, Rudrawati Primary School is isolating 10 returnees from India and faces the same problems of lack of water and proper toilets. Returnees are forced to sleep on the floor and get their own provisions. None of those quarantined has been medically checked.

There is also a shortage of health workers, with none available in the 91 quarantine centres and one municipal isolation ward in Musikot. Mayor Somnath Sapkota says: "We requested the provincial government to provide one MBBS-qualified doctor, but have received no response so far."



As India relaxes its lockdown, tens of thousands more Nepalis have been arriving at the border every day and many of them will find their way up to Gulmi and Baglung – two districts with some of the highest outmigration rates in Nepal.

Sunil Rana made an arduous journey from Gurgaon in India to the Nepal border and after waiting there many days arrived in Musikot only to be quarantined in a local school. "I never got a health check anywhere along the way, and I have still not been tested," he says.

This month alone, 393 people have arrived in Musikot from India after crossing the border at Sunauli. In the month before that there were 374 from India and 33 from overseas via Kathmandu airport. With a new wave of one thousand people expected to arrive from India in Gulmi in the coming week, the district is just not prepared to deal with the numbers.

The municipality has set aside Rs10 million for relief to vulnerable families, buying medical equipment and other paraphernalia. Most of that money has been spent, and there is nothing left for the upkeep of quarantine centres.

Baglung district is also in danger of being overwhelmed by a new influx of returnees from India. In Galkot Municipality, Ratnalaxmi Secondary School has 17 people and Manewa Basic School houses nine, some of whom are children.

"No medical tests have been done, and many are crammed into one room and forced to use the same taps and toilets. Those in isolation have to manage food and water by themselves," says Tham Bahadur BK who made a difficult journey back from India.

Chief Consultant of Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital in Kathmandu Anup Bastola says the unsanitary and crowded conditions do not just expose healthy people to the virus, but they could also contract other infections including dengue, malaria, diarrhoea and tuberculosis.

"We should actually be pushing

for home quarantine because it will be safer, and only those with COVID-19 symptoms should be taken to hospitals isolation wards," says Bastola.

Two years ago, the government had stipulated that every one of the 763 municipalities in Nepal have at least one MBBS doctor, but that policy never got implemented. Districts like Gulmi are now suffering because of the lack of trained medical professionals during the pandemic.

The former head of the Epidemiology and Disease Control Department in Kathmandu Baburam Marasini says the whole of western Nepal is in danger of being a hot spot for community spread of COVID-19 as more and more people returning from India go back to their home villages without tests and quarantines.

So far, it is just the workers from India who have returned. In another few weeks, thousands of workers from the Gulf and Malaysia are also expected to start arriving, and the government has asked local governments to arrange for their quarantines.

Mayor Sapkota in Musikot blames the situation on the central government not doing enough during the lockdown to prepare for the influx of workers from abroad: "They asked us to follow WHO guidelines, but did not take into account the resources available on the ground. There was no provision made for local conditions." ■





# Build back greener

Five reasons why Nepal's COVID-19 recovery should be green

Bishwa Nath Oli, Maheshwar Dhakal and Rudriksha Rai Parajuli

As Nepal and the world face unprecedented risks and hardships due to the coronavirus, we are all rightly focussed on immediate responses to the pandemic. The crisis highlights how vulnerable we all are to over-exploitation of our natural environment, and the increase in the risk of transmission of animal disease.

As we mark World Environment

Day on Friday 5 June with the theme 'biodiversity', our attention is drawn to reduce such vulnerabilities and to use economic recovery efforts to 'build back greener'. This is particularly important for Nepal, whose economy is highly reliant on natural resources, whether in agriculture, forestry, hydropower or nature-based tourism.

All four sectors have been impacted adversely by the coronavirus lockdown, adding to existing environmental pressures and creating real hardships for millions.

For example, the cancellation of Mt Everest climbing and trekking has brought the economies of towns like Namche Bazar to a grinding halt, adding to the existing risks from climate change.

"As the government forges efforts to build back the economy amidst the coronavirus crisis, these are important times to think ahead and consider options that enable us to also build back greener and better," says Faris Hadad-Zervos, World Bank Country Manager for Nepal. "This will help contribute to the sustainable

development of Nepal in ensuring long-term social, economic and environmental co-benefits to build prosperity and resilience of Nepalis."

Growing back greener may seem to be something for the future, given that millions of Nepalis are currently concerned about the loss of their livelihoods. However, there is increasing consensus that growing back greener can generate jobs now -- while ensuring that the recovery is sustainable.

Here are five reasons why this approach is very applicable to Nepal:



KUNDA DIXIT



EDCW



KUNDA DIXIT

**1 Resilience.** Investment in disease control and disaster warning systems are cost-effective and can save over \$5 for every \$1 spent, according to the World Resources Institute. Social protection can also be rolled out quickly to help the most vulnerable and prevent people from raiding natural resources like forests and riverbed materials out of desperation. Job creation schemes to build resilient infrastructure, maintain roads, and trekking trails in nature-based tourism destinations can all create jobs now, through initiatives like the Prime Minister's Employment Program. Likewise, work to manage watersheds through afforestation and terracing to reduce erosion and landslide risks can also create employment while absorbing greenhouse gases and creating productive assets that are green and resilient.

**2 Clean Energy.** Nepal's substantial hydropower, solar and biomass energy resources can be tapped to create sustainable jobs that have positive economic returns. Global surveys show that every \$1 invested in renewable energy and energy efficiency brings economic returns of \$3-\$8. For Nepal, this is already economically attractive. By sustaining reforms for clean energy development as part of COVID-19 recovery, Nepal can increase international investment and create recovery jobs to 'fuel' a green recovery.

**3 Nature-based Solutions.** Nepal's abundant and sustainable eco-tourism, forestry and agriculture sectors can quickly create hundreds of thousands of jobs and ensure that Nepal's air, water and land resources remain clean and healthy. Nepal has a proud track record of increasing its forest cover to 45% and a well-connected, protected area system. These forest resources can now be used to generate thousands of jobs in sustainable forestry -- supporting enterprises that can contribute to the economy.

Sustainable forest management practices can also protect ecosystems that are under threat from invasive species. Species that are migrating to higher altitudes as temperatures in mountain areas increase at twice the global average. This is economically important as Nepal's pristine landscapes support some of the world's most iconic and endangered animals and provide the basis for a world-renowned tourism industry. Protecting this natural capital in Nepal's national parks and conservation areas against poachers is even more important during these challenging times. Likewise, human-wildlife conflict needs to be addressed to maintain co-existence between people and nature. Again, every \$1 invested in nature can provide a return of up to \$50.



MANISH PAUDEL



KUNDA DIXIT

**4 Green Policies.** Incentives are needed for green job creation by removal of taxes on green imports such as solar panels and providing credit for businesses to move to 'green' sectors such as high value organic farming. Green policies can include promotion of electric cooking to reduce indoor air pollution and fuel wood consumption while protecting women's health. The economic cost on health from air and water pollution in Nepal was estimated at \$259 million in 2015 by the World Bank.

Reduction of fossil fuel subsidies and enactment of policies to promote job creation in the forestry sector through sustainable extraction of timber is another area. Fiscal incentives for green investments by private sector enterprises in cleaner production, energy efficiency and improved sanitation are other measures, with the latter being a key factor for tourism development in the post-COVID recovery. All these measures have positive job creation potential. At the same time making sure the environmental impacts of new investments continue to be mitigated well, will be hugely important.

"A green recovery that channels investment into nature-based solutions and away from carbon-intensive growth will provide sustainable opportunities for employment generation, and improve wellbeing. It will contribute to international efforts to limit the increase of global temperature to 1.5°C and will help build inclusive and resilient societies in Nepal and the Himalaya," says ICIMOD Director General David Molden.

**5 Cooperation.** Green recovery at all levels is critical to respond effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the national-level cooperation is needed between local, provincial and federal governments, and internationally between Nepal and its neighbours and across the global community. For example, greater regional cooperation on water management can help over 1.6 billion people cope better with future floods and droughts. At the same time Nepal can earn over \$9 billion per year by exporting hydropower resources in the region, clean power that can also reduce South Asia's carbon emissions.

"Nepal's force is its youth, several hundred used to quit the country daily before COVID. As we write, thousands are returning looking for livelihoods and 'hope'," says UNDP Resident Representative Ayshanie Labe. "Nepal is full of nature-based prospects that are opportunities to connect nature and technology to create livelihoods. Recovery efforts should not miss this chance to meaningfully engage with the Nepali youth, girls and boys alike, so that they become resilient."

These five measures require public and private investments. Nepal is already investing in developing many of these natural resources, using both domestic and international sources. However, investments in COVID-19 economic recovery efforts provide both the need and opportunity to look for more innovative forms of financing. These could include issuing green bonds for job-intensive green infrastructure and developing financial instruments for risk-mitigation.

In addition, accessing additional climate finance for renewable energy, like Nepal's Central Renewable Energy fund or raising revenue through the Forest Development Fund can help support a green recovery and meet Nepal's sustainable development and climate commitments while creating the jobs to put Nepal firmly back on its path to a 'Prosperous Nepal and Happy Nepali'.

Says Lisa Honan Country Director of DFID Nepal: "The UK is already supporting Nepal to build its resilience, improving health and early warning systems, supporting disaster management and building climate resilient infrastructure for the most vulnerable. At the same time the UK is also working with Nepal to develop its hydropower, solar power and forestry resources. We now want to adapt this work to support Nepal create sustainable jobs and 'green its recovery' so that it can act as a global example of sustainable, low carbon response from the coronavirus pandemic."

*Bishwa Nath Oli is Secretary at the Ministry of Forest and Environment, Maheshwar Dhakal is Joint Secretary at the Ministry of Forest and Environment and Rudriksha Rai Parajuli is Livelihoods Adviser with DFID Nepal. This commentary is not an official policy statement, and is supported by the Ministry of Forests and Environment, International Centre of Integrated Mountain Development, UK Department for International Development, United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank.*