

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

HOME COMING

If there is one proof of the fecklessness of the Nepali state in the past 25 years, it is that governments have forced a whole generation of citizens to seek jobs abroad. To be sure, migration has been a part of Nepali life ever since the first recruits joined the East India Company's army even while Nepal was battling the British in Kumaon. Nepalis flocked to Gorakhpur when they heard the indentured labourers were needed for colonial sugar plantations in Fiji and the West Indies. In the last century, indebted subsistence farmers left for Sikkim, Assam and Bhutan by the thousands. Outmigration always served as a safety valve – a much easier option than attracting investment so jobs were created at home. The 1996-2006 war increased this exodus, people were leaving not just for employment, but also security. Nepal became the country with the highest proportion of its GDP worth coming from remittances — much higher than labour-exporting countries like Philippines, Bangladesh and even Haiti.



As a remittance-based economy Nepal is threatened by geopolitical tension, the price of oil, xenophobia, and trends in the global economy. After the two Iraq wars, during the Saudi-UAE blockade of Qatar and more recently after tensions flared between Iran and the US, the future of migration looked shaky.

These uncertainties have added to the vulnerability of Nepalis already fleeing injustice, inequality and structural discrimination at home. But even during the process of leaving they are extorted by ruthless middlemen, airport officials, recruitment agencies and host country governments.

All these risks have converged during the coronavirus crisis. There is no way Nepal can bring back all 4 million of its citizens working abroad, the government has been overwhelmed by even the 250,000 who have returned or want to do so.

Repatriation is difficult because there is a huge discrepancy between those who want to come home and the limited numbers of flights available. The government has made guidelines on who gets to go first, it has developed an arrival protocol.

But there were gaping holes in this plan. Those who can pull strings have got on the first flights. The Nepal Airlines Airbus that

came back on Tuesday night from Canberra with 11 passengers was mainly carrying government officials and families stranded in Australia.

The 3,500 Nepali undocumented workers in Kuwait and the 17,000 in UAE who were supposed to be on the priority list were following all this on social media and were outraged. The first Kuwait flights finally arrived on Thursday.

In such a huge undertaking, lapses were to be expected. Putting a scale to vulnerability will by definition be subjective. The government woke up to the criticism and on Wednesday brought out a timetable of flights, fixed the price of tickets from destinations, and issued guidelines on arrival criteria? But we have to see if powerful people still try to jump the queue.

A major flaw in the process is still that the workers are required to bear the cost of tickets themselves. As our report shows, many have been stranded for over two months in camps, and exhausted all their savings on room and

food, there is no way they can afford the inflated fares on chartered flights.

As one dejected Nepali worker in Dubai told our reporter over the phone after hearing of the Sharjah flight: "The only consolation I can take from this is that at least some Nepalis got to go home."

Pregnant women in UAE were assured by the embassy they were on the priority list, but now have to wait some more because two UAE security companies took the first flights out.

NEPAL ARMY

The other government rule required everyone to have a COVID-19 negative medical certificate before boarding. None of those who have arrived so far did these tests before boarding. Where are the stranded workers going to go now to get tested?

Nepali embassies abroad are over-ruled by uncoordinated decisions by ministries in Kathmandu. The COVID-19 repatriation exposes all the chronic weaknesses in governance and magnifies them: ad hocism, lack of coordination and communication, neglect of the weakest and poorest.

The least the government can do now is communicate transparently about the flight schedules, who will be on them, how to get tickets at the designated price, support for those who cannot afford it, and not do any more hanky panky when passenger manifests. Returnees have been through a lot – they should not be given more hardship and grief when they arrive.

The crisis also provides an opportunity for the government to look at ways to provide employment at home for as many returnees as possible. But that is for later. First things first.

The COVID-19 repatriation challenge exposes all the chronic weaknesses in governance in Nepal

10 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

In his guest column 10 years ago this week issue #506, communist leader Mohan Bikram Singh critiqued the Maoist's policies which he said were "misguided" and "lacked understanding of the constitutional process". Even a decade later, Singh's ominous words ring true. Excerpt:

'They are suffering an identity crisis and are drifting towards social fascism. If this trend persists, we won't be making progress towards a dictatorship of the proletariat and we will not see a new people's revolution: we will drift towards a non-revolutionary fascist dictatorship.'

The extreme 'leftist' ideology and the war the Maoists waged was a mistake and it was unsuccessful. But even after they abandoned their armed struggle, they haven't been able to shed their extremist tendencies and anarchist behaviour.'



ONLINE PACKAGES



DOJO ON THE GO

Meet Gio and Ge, the unlikely martial arts aficionados who have been stuck in Nepal after the lockdown and decided to use the time to train children in karate and taekwondo and record online tutorials. Story: page 7.



HOME AT LAST

Nearly three months after the lockdown, the government has finally started to bring back home stranded Nepali workers from abroad. 324 undocumented female workers from Kuwait arrived on two flights at Kathmandu airport on Thursday. Watch video on our YouTube channel. Story: pages 1 and 10.

GREEN NEPALI TIMES

A source of inspiration in these troubled times ('Nepal's post-pandemic green revival', Kunda Dixit, #1013)! A glimmer of hope in environmental conservation.

Bharat Dutta Koirala

■ Positive environmental news, a signpost as to possible ways forward and good news from other quarters would make a huge difference compared to all the negative political bashing and depressing news of the moment.

Ian Wall

■ The solar farm resides at a place where our football pitch used to be some 5 years ago ('Nepal's biggest solar power plant', nepalitimes.com). It has added an extra dimension in Nepal's power industry predominant with ROR hydropower projects. It is also the 2nd NEA project to be completed in the district with few more on the queue. Despite the on-going coronavirus crisis and bad governance, I am hopeful for a better tomorrow.

Nabeen Bhatta

■ Bicycles could be the best alternative to reduce the traffic ('Re-Cycling Kathmandu', Bhushan Tuladhar, #1013). It is also eco-friendly and will help reduce petrol and diesel consumption significantly. But fragile road management and lack of cycling lanes make it impractical for daily use.

Thé Meer

HELPING HANDS

Youth, private sector and small local bodies are always the first to rise up and it's done from the goodness of heart ('Lockdown brings out the best in Nepalis', Alisha Sijapati, #1013). They find solutions to daunting problems and stare down any humanitarian crisis without bias, without fear and on time. Thanks *Nepali Times* for highlighting the efforts of the good-hearted people and the work they are doing.

Jenny Caunt

PEACEFUL PROTESTS

It was meant to be a peaceful protest to raise awareness to acquire more reliable PCR kits to test Nepali migrant workers returnees ('Peaceful physically distanced protests', nepalitimes.com). But the incompetent government couldn't tolerate it. Why the use of batons and water cannons to silence the voices of the youth? Some of them are directly involved in distributing reliefs in far-flung regions of the country where the government have set up ineffective quarantine centres.

Vairochana Sherpa

■ Youth are now systematically and logically coming forth to fight against injustice, inequality, and incompetence. I pray that each protest may be peaceful and fruitful.

Ngawang Tenzin

WHAT'S TRENDING



Peaceful physically distanced protests

by *Monika Deupala and Bikram Rai*
People in Kathmandu came together to this week demanding better governance and response to the COVID-19 crisis. The police use of batons, water cannons and arrests depicted in this photo feature was widely shared on social media and provoked outrage online.

Most reached and shared on Facebook

Most commented




Re-cycling Kathmandu

by *Bhushan Tuladhar*
Bicycles force people to maintain physical distance while taking minimum space on the streets. Physical exercise and clean air help keep the immune system strong. The world is looking at bicycles as a driver of post COVID-19 green recovery, and it is time for Kathmandu to take that leap as well. Visit nepalitimes.com for the story.


Most popular on Twitter


Most visited online page


QUOTE TWEETS

- 

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
On the eve of #WorldEnvironmentDay on 5 June, the Nepal government utility inaugurated the first phase of its first 25MW solar array that will feed electricity directly into the national grid. Read the full report on #Nepal's biggest solar power plant: [nepalitimes.com](#)
- 

Trishagni @TirmureAchaar
Happy World Environment Day! Let's hope for more Solar Plants to diversify our portfolio of Renewable Energy.
- 

Manjeet Dhakal @manjeetdhakal
Despite some glitches with high tax upturn on #ElectricVehicles through Budget last week, on the eve of #WorldEnvironmentDay, a good news that the first phase of the country's largest 25 MW #SOLAR power project started operation & added to the national grid. #RenewableEnergy
- 

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
#Bicycles force people to maintain physical distance while taking minimum space. Physical exercise and clean air help keep the immune system strong. Bicycles as a driver of post #COVID19 green recovery, writes @BhushanTuladhar.
- 

Arpan @ArpanAd69823011
Must need change, even European countries are promoting cycle these days...Hope this might really come to effect.

- 

Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Stranded Nepalis start to fly home
Government releases timetable of evacuation flights for Nepalis stranded in 34 countries.
#Nepal #MigrantWorkers #repatriation #coronavirus
- 

Prakash @CJoe1984
What about the price that has been increased? Is government watching it? Most of the people have lost their job and doing nothing since the pandemic started. How will they pay air fare?



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** ranchanas@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



The dangers of the dengue virus

Haphazard urbanisation in Nepal has created ideal conditions for the mosquito that carries the disease

There have been few days without rain this April and May in Kathmandu. That means more disease for Kathmandu. Not COVID-19, but the virus we used to talk about — last year's scary unknown disease, dengue.



HISTORY OF DISEASE
Tom Robertson

The year 2019 saw Nepal's worst ever outbreak of dengue, with 15,000 people infected, many times the previous high. Dengue was particularly bad in the Kathmandu Valley. At least six people died.

The medical journal *The Lancet* has warned that Kathmandu could see a dengue 'explosion' because it has become 'an ideal breeding ground' for the mosquito that carries dengue — the notorious *Aedes aegypti*. Already in 2020, four cases have been reported in Kathmandu, and four in Lalitpur.

Dengue spiked in 2019 with outbreaks around the developing world. In recent years, Delhi, Dhaka, Ho Chi Minh City, Senegal and Singapore have faced bad outbreaks. A dengue outbreak in Delhi in 2015 inundated hospitals and clinics across the city.

Dengue likes warm humid conditions. Before corona, dengue was the world's fastest growing dangerous virus, increasing four-fold in just over a decade. Two of every five people around the world, nearly 3 billion people, live in dengue risk areas where it is a leading cause of illness. Each year approximately 100 million people contract the disease, and over 20,000 die.

Like malaria, dengue is actually several different diseases that we give a single name. There are four dengue viruses: Dengue 1, 2, 3, and 4. A person can catch each one, and get sick as many as four times.

A first infection generally brings only mild flu symptoms, if any at all. But a second infection can cause 'severe dengue' with plasma leakage, bleeding, and shock. This can kill. No treatment exists for dengue, but generally symptoms can be managed.

Dengue's main mosquito host, *Aedes aegypti*, is no ordinary mosquito. In a species known for death and deviousness, it has few rivals. Not many mosquitoes have so successfully defied human efforts at control, including in recent decades.

Long before dengue, *Aedes aegypti* carried a far deadlier disease: yellow fever. During the 16th and 17th century, slave ships brought yellow fever carrying *A. aegypti* from Africa to the Americas, devastating indigenous populations and reshaping the region's balance of power. In the early twentieth century, the *A. aegypti* — yellow fever combination almost blocked the construction of the Panama Canal.

Most wildlife avoid humans. Not *A. aegypti*. It loves us, particularly the ecological disorder we often create. The more humans,

the more disturbed ecosystems, the more *A. aegypti*. Cities, especially disorganised cities, create ideal habitat: lots of standing water for breeding and lots of humans for feeding.

Dengue's other mosquito carrier is *A. albopictus*.

The Lancet points to dengue's major causes: climate change, relentless and haphazard urbanisation, brisk trade and transit from dengue-infested areas, and poor health infrastructure. As Kathmandu grows and gets more connected to other parts of Asia, dengue spreads.

Climate change has been overrated as a cause. Warming temperatures can extend the range of *Aedes* carriers but other causes deserve more attention. 'Last summer's explosion of dengue in Kathmandu Valley was blamed on climate change,' the *Nepali Times* recently noted, 'but it was actually a perfect storm of crowded and squalid living conditions, poor drainage, greater mobility of people, and a particularly wet monsoon.'

The real problem is disorganised urbanisation. The *A. aegypti* carrier thrives in small collections of clean water in flower pots, old car and truck tyres, uncovered water containers, and even puddles. It bites people early morning and at dusk.

Nepal, like much of the

developing world, has witnessed dramatic and disorderly urban growth in recent years, much in the lowlands along highways. 'Nepal's Tarai,' Mukesh Pokhrel recently wrote also in this newspaper, "is turning into one endless elongated metropolis.'

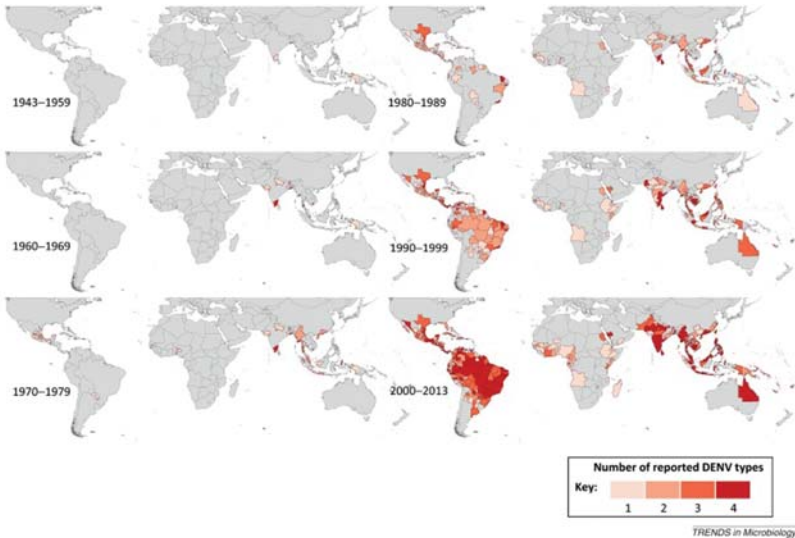
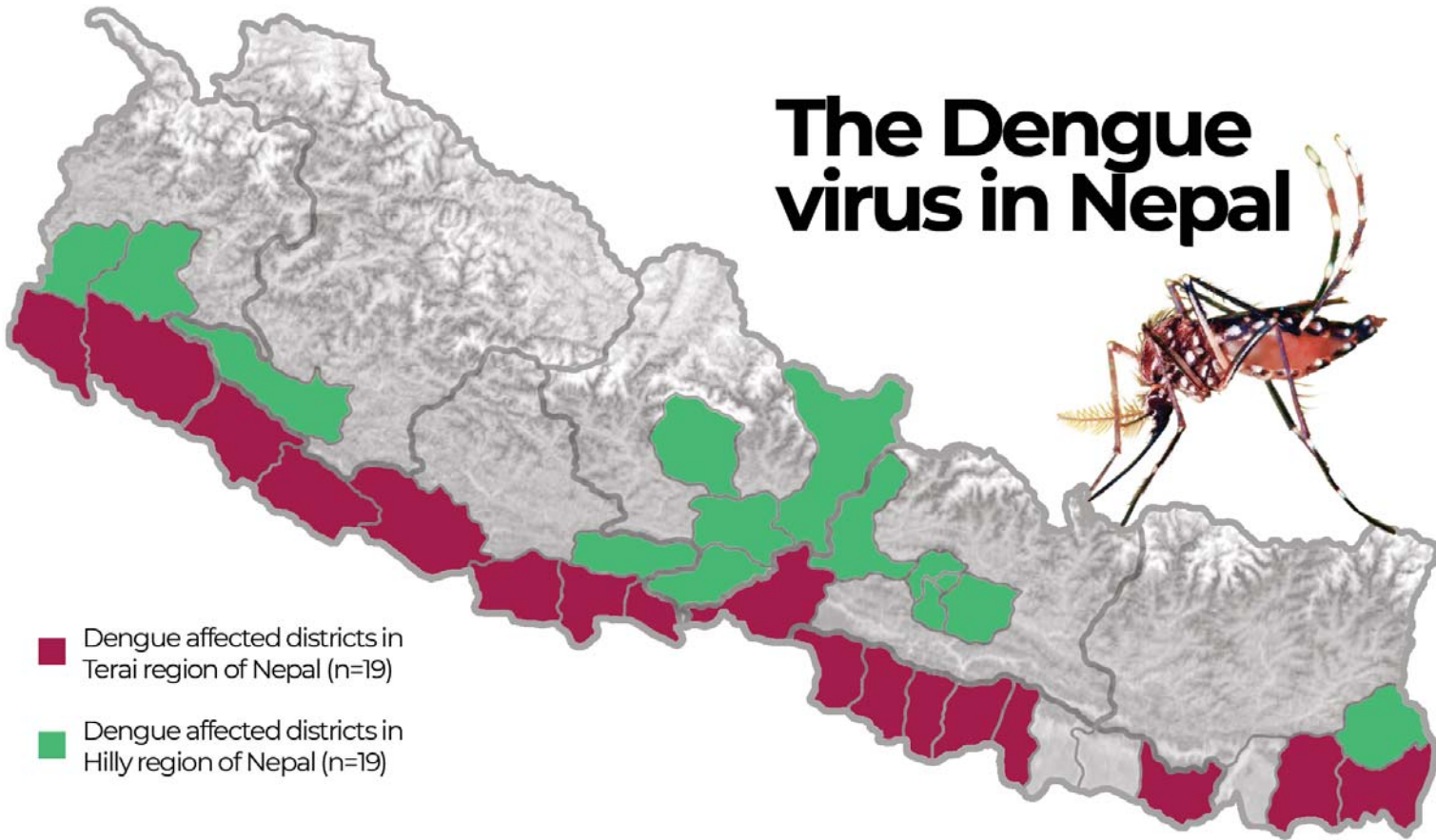
Kathmandu itself grew four-fold between 1980 and 2010, and is one of the fastest growing cities in one of the world's fastest urbanising regions.

'Cities like Kathmandu are perfect breeding grounds for the *Aedes* mosquito,' says Jeremy Farrar of the Wellcome Trust in an interview with this paper. 'Kathmandu's climate is changing, the city is growing exponentially in a haphazard way and the mosquito loves highly dense populations of people.'

The Lancet highlights what might happen in a dengue explosion in Kathmandu. 'A tug-of-war might occur between the worried well and the truly sick,' it says. 'Hospitals might be overwhelmed and many needy patients with other diseases could be turned away.'

Doctors inexperienced with the disease pose a particular worry. They could misunderstand its dynamics and cause unnecessary deaths by over-treating with unneeded antibiotics, transfusions, and excessive intravenous fluids.

The Dengue virus in Nepal



This has happened elsewhere.

The dengue-carrying *Aedes aegypti* mosquito is difficult to control. Brazil eradicated it twice, in the 1950s and in the 1970s, and twice it returned. Several factors explain why: a lack of sustained careful epidemiological surveillance, insecticide resistance, the high costs of materials and wages, insufficient community participation and coordination with the health sector, and, crucially, the spread of haphazard urban development. Narrow control programs inevitably run into trouble.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) stresses both micro and macro efforts to fight dengue. Individual families can put tight lids on water containers. They can eliminate breeding spots such as empty cans, bottles, and tires. It also says community engagement and building country capacity for environmental management and disease surveillance is important.

"Locally adapted vector control measures such as household water

storage management and, more importantly, engaging individuals and communities to manage their immediate environment are essential to controlling the spread of the disease," says Raman Velayudhan, head of WHO's Vector and Ecology Management Unit.

School-based awareness programs, *The Lancet* authors noted, can help block dengue's spread. 'Students are good learners and can be taught to effectively use repellents and mosquito nets and get rid of water collections near their homes and schools; students will then spread this information to their parents.' Several countries have implemented successful school programs.

Historian Frank Snowden sums it up: "Dengue takes full advantage of societal neglect and the absence or cessation of vector control programs." 🇳🇵

Tom Robertson, Ph D, is an environmental historian who writes about malaria in Nepal. And just wrote a five-part series on smallpox for Nepali Times as part of this History of Disease column.

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

Nepal at the edge of the COVID-19 precipice

Connect the dots: oil import, electric cars, drop in remittances, air pollution, coronavirus lockdown

Albert Einstein is attributed for defining insanity as repeating the same process again and again, but expecting a different result. By this logic, we human beings are stark raving bonkers. But excelling even more on Einstein's madness scale would be us Nepalis.



1/2 FULL
Anil Chitrakar

President Bidya Devi Bhandari recently recited a two-and-half hour long speech about the government's plans and policies. In parliamentary systems, this is just a formality. But Finance Minister Yubaraj Khatriwada proceeded to deliver his budget speech from the same podium that completely contradicted what she had laid out a few days previously.

As usual, the budget speech is a cut-and-paste job that repeated ad nauseam a wish list that has been repeated ad nauseam before. Wonder if the same person has been writing the speech for decades, with minor edits to suit the political masters of the day.

The budget cannot just be a menu followed by ad-hoc allocations and some vague source of revenue. It needs to give the people a clear direction – especially at time when it is clearly headed to the edge of the coronavirus precipice.

Traditional wisdom says that if you want to make God laugh, tell him/her/it that you have A Plan. Nepal always seems to have a plan for every situation. The only problem with these plans is that they never get implemented.

Some donor-funded projects do get some work done because the agencies doling out the money are accountable to tax payers back home. But even here, Nepalis have to watch from the sidelines because the way contracts are awarded and the method with which the government, its development partners and lenders procure services, is opaque and restricted.

One of the goals is 'capacity building'. It always has been. The hidden costs of doing business in Nepal is on the rise, and unless you have an inside track nothing moves. No wonder the poor always end up paying more for almost everything.

So, chocolate is going to be cheaper and electric vehicles are going to be more expensive. That is what the average person on the street has concluded about the budget. Nepal will generate 1,300MW more power this year, doubling its generation capacity.

But the Finance Minister does not want to create a market for surplus power by encouraging electric vehicles. Everyone gets it.



BHANU BHATTARAI

A senior government official says government drivers, administrators, and accountants will never allow us to replace diesel and petrol vehicles because they still have not figured out how to pilfer from electric vehicles. Once this problem is solved, you can be sure electric vehicles will become a normal part of our life.

So we will have plenty of cheap chocolate, a lush new carpet at the presidential palace, and cabinet ministers who look really fit because they are getting a new gym. Now that foreign hospitals and treatment are not an option due to the lockdown, it makes perfect sense. Someone has also figured out that Nepal's donors will pay for almost anything in the wish list, but a carpet and gym maybe a bit of a push. We know how to work these systems.

Many thinkers and writers have taught us that the problem with the present application of capitalism is that all the profit goes into private pockets or bank accounts, but all the costs and risks are ultimately socialised. No one can tell us where and how our politicians became so good at condemning capitalism, but they do not quite seem to get the idea for the need to replace imported fossil fuels, which are paid for by precious foreign currency earned by our young migrant workers.

They do not seem to get the link between the cost of imported vehicles, imported fossil fuel,

declining jobs in foreign lands, numerous Indian blockades and air pollution that makes all of us vulnerable to COVID-19 which seems to prefer to attack the respiratory system. Then there is climate change, but that was dealt with on World Environment Day. The budget should be the platform that establishes these linkages.

COVID-19 has demonstrated that our vulnerability depends on our health and also our wealth. Many rich people do not work in the essentials services sector, have health insurance and access to the best services. The poor, who should be more concerned, demand an end to the lockdown and the need to go back to the old normal that was, all said and done, working in their favour. Change is easy to demand but very difficult to implement.

The poor, who have neither health nor wealth, get sick, die and leave their families poorer than before. Breaking this vicious cycle is what the budget needed to address. It is this systemic poverty that keeps many politicians in power.

The poor become the vote bank, and the poverty card is played every four to five years to get into positions of power. The budget making process forgets who and how they got into power in the first place. 🇳🇵

Anil Chitrakar is President of Siddhartinc and this is his fortnightly column 1/2 Full in Nepali Times.

prabhu BANK BIZ BRIEFS

Qatar flight growth

Qatar Airways' share of the passenger and cargo market has grown significantly over the past three months. The airline continued its operation during the



pandemic, operating over 15,000 flights to take over 1.8 million people home while the cargo division transported over 200,000 tonnes of essential supplies to impacted regions.

USAID COVID-19 fund

The USAID has announced an additional \$5.5 million funding to mitigate the secondary impacts of COVID-19 in Nepal, bringing its assistance amount to \$7.3 million.



The funding will go to recovery for small businesses and help local governments respond to COVID-19 with private sector investment.

Turkish Airlines

Turkish airlines has updated the durations for passengers' arrival at the airports as well as the check-in process. In order



to avoid any time loss due to additional measures taken at the airports, passengers are recommended to arrive at the airports at least 3 hours before their flight.

CREASION and Coca-Cola

CREASION Nepal and The Coca-Cola Foundation have concluded the third week of the ongoing Waste Workers Emergency Relief Project (WWERP), reaching out to 287 waste management workers with ration packages, medicine and PPEs.

Century Bank

Century Bank, with the support of the Music Association of Nepal and Shambhujet Music House, has provided food to members of the arts and music community affected by the COVID-19 crisis.

NIBL wins case in Italy

Nepal Investment Bank on 9 June won a bank guarantee case against Italian bank Intesa Sanpaolo. In 2018 the Italian bank issued counter guarantees to NIBL amounting to Rs2.1 billion in favour of



Tanahu Hydropower client Cooperativa Muratori and Cementisti (CMC). Last year NIBL received a claim from Tanahu Hydropower stating that their client had breached the terms of the contract, leading NIBL to lodge its own claim for bank guarantee.

Sathi mobile repair

Ride-sharing app Sathi has come to the rescue of people whose phones need



repairs during the lockdown. The ride-sharing service will pick up damaged cellphones with pick-up and drop-off after repairs.



NEPAL
WHEREVER
YOU ARE.

Times.com

prabhu BANK

Despite the COVID-19 lockdown, conservationists in eastern Nepal are busy tracking ten wild red pandas they had fitted for the first time with GPS-satellite collars in December to monitor their behaviour and habitat.

The 10 red pandas were tranquilised and fitted with collars in the Panchthar-Ilam-Taplejung (PIT) Corridor, a forested area on the border between Nepal and India near Mt Kangchenjunga, the world's third highest mountain.

The data shows the movement of red panda between the Nepal and India, and also allows researchers to track their habits. This will help them protect the shy animal, which is listed as an endangered mammal on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species.

"This is a great milestone in red panda conservation," says Man Bahadur Khadka, Director General of Nepal's Department of Forests and Soil Conservation (DOFSC). "We are committed to the protection and conservation of this charismatic species whose survival is mainly threatened by human factors."

This satellite tracking provides data of the pandas' positions every two hours, and will help conservationists better understand how red pandas interact in a habitat that is dominated by human settlements. Their movement, interaction with each other and response to disturbances will be analysed, says lead investigator Damber Bista, a PhD student at the University of Queensland.

This GPS-Satellite tracking project is led by the DOFSC with technical support from the Department of National Parks and Red Panda Network. The tracking and collaring of the six female and four male red pandas took three months from September to December 2019 in Sandakpur Rural Municipality of Ilam district.

The research team consisted of officials from the government, Red Panda Network, University of Queensland, local Forest Guardians, and the Divisional Forest Office in Ilam and Janno Weerman at Rotterdam Zoo.

Red panda sightings are regarded as auspicious by local people, and their cuddly appearance make them a popular species. Yet their numbers in Nepal are dwindling because of poaching and habitat destruction. Despite not having any medicinal, cultural, or religious value of red panda, its illegal pelt trade in Nepal is on the rise due to the misconception among public.

Known as *habre* in Nepali and *punde kundo* in the local dialect in Ilam, the red panda is from a distinct taxonomical group and is not related to the giant panda, which belongs to the bear family.

"Red pandas are the only extant member of their taxonomic family," explains Angela Glatston of the Global Species Management Plan and chair of the Red Panda Network board, "which means that if they were to become extinct that would be, at least taxonomically, like losing the whole cat family, from lions to domestic cats."

The animal lives on the canopy of broadleaf and mixed temperate forests from western Nepal right up to Sichuan, and is an excellent tree-climber. There are now less than 10,000 wild red pandas worldwide, and 800 in zoos around the world. There are only 1,000 left in 24 of Nepal's 77 districts.

Despite the stiff penalties for killing the animal, they are poached for their hides even though there does not seem to be



JAMES HOUSTON

Tracking Nepal's red panda by satellite

All ten red pandas fitted with GPS collars are moving about merrily in the forests of Ilam



SONAM TASHI LAMA



a trans-boundary market for the fur. While red panda inside Nepal's national parks are protected, now communities in Nepal's eastern districts of Panchthar, Ilam and Taplejung which have one-fourth of the total red panda population in the country have set up Forest Guardians

to protect and monitor the red panda.

The GPS-satellite collar study is part of the Red Panda Network's long-term monitoring initiative and is already providing valuable baseline data on the animal's ecology, distribution, and behaviour. The study is supported by Rotterdam Zoo which

has been involved in red panda research and conservation since 1978.

"Data from all ten of the collared animals are being tracked, they seem to be moving about well," says Sonam Tashi Lama of the Red Panda Network. "If we lose data because of

canopy or cloud obstruction we have Forest Guardians on the ground who have VHF antenna and camera traps to go look for them."

The Network set up the Forest Guardians in villages in the red panda range on the Nepal side of the habitat to provide intelligence about possible poachers and to monitor the animals. Locals in Ilam have not reported any increase in poaching activity during the lockdown, as has been seen in some community forests and national parks in Nepal.

Says Ang Phuri Sherpa, Country Director in Nepal of the Red Panda Network: "This is a proud moment for us to have the opportunity to fulfill one of the objectives of Nepal's Red Panda Conservation Action Plan."

This is the first time GPS-satellite collars are being used to study red pandas in the wild. During the 1980s, the pioneer red panda biologist from Nepal, the late Pralad Yonzon, had used terrestrial radio collars to study red pandas in Langtang National Park, central Nepal. A female red panda among the ten animals collared was named Pralad Devi in honour of the conservationist who was killed when his bicycle was hit by a truck in Kathmandu in 2011.

The other red pandas were named Paaru, Dolma, Chintapu, Mechhachha, Bhumo, Senehang, Ngima, Brian, and Ninamma by local people including Forest Guardians, and the names represent culture, landscape, language, and ethnicity of the region.

The GPS collars were first tested with two captive red pandas at Rotterdam Zoo to evaluate their effectiveness before being fitted on the ten animals in Ilam.

Janno Weerman at the Rotterdam Zoo who was involved in collaring the animals in Ilam, says: "It is very important that conservationists on the ground in Nepal and in Rotterdam work together to protect the red panda and their habitat. Part of this cooperation is the GPS collaring research. The results will give us insight into the ecology of the species and their natural habitat."

INTO THE WILD: (top to bottom) Paaru, the first red panda to be GPS collared in Nepal in September 2019.

Reserachers fit Paaru with a GPS collar in September 2019.

The red panda range in Nepal, India, Bhutan, Burma and China.

VIRTUAL EVENTS



Essay Contest

The ‘Dream Now Travel Later’ contest from Tilicho Home invites Nepali travel enthusiasts to submit a 350-word essay in Nepali or English on where in Nepal they would like to travel post-lockdown and why. The winning essay will win a trip for 2 to Mustang including airfare, two nights full board at Om’s Home, Jomsom and one night full board at Red House Lodge, Kagbeni. Watch video: <https://youtu.be/3in6a4ianhM>

Submit the essay at tilichohome@gmail.com. Write ‘Dream Now Travel Later’ in the subject line and include contact information. *Deadline: 15 August, 9851038325*

Music contest

Alliance Française de Kathmandu is organising a music contest to celebrate World Music Day. Send in a solo or band performance video of an original composition or a cover song. Get additional details and register for free on Facebook until 17 June.



ICCRROM webinar

Participate in the webinar ‘Accessing heritage during a pandemic’ from the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property. The webinar will discuss digital possibilities and offer digital connections and tools for people to access heritage across the world. Details on the ICCROM Facebook page *12 June, 5:45pm onwards*



DHE
A moving story

Virtual tour

Take a virtual heritage tour through the village of Dhe in Mustang. Tour through places of social, cultural, and religious significance and learn about the history and heritage of the village. Go to Story Cycle’s Facebook page to register for the tour. *19 June, 4pm onwards*

Poetry Festival

Shailee Theatre will begin publishing poems from its annual World Child Poetry Festival on YouTube from the upcoming week.

ONLINE ARCHIVES



Free Netflix documentaries

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

This is home

Visit traditional homes from countries around the world with Google’s *This is Home* tour. Learn about the history behind each of these places and get a glimpse inside the unique structures with Google Street View.



Coursera

Interested to learn about subjects that aren’t available in Nepali colleges and universities? Coursera partners with universities, organisations, and trusts around the world and provides universal access via a searchable database to free online courses covering a wide variety of topics.




Art exhibition

The Museum of Nepali Art’s second 360° virtual art exhibition, *Inception*, is a collection of Nepali artistic masterpieces by some of Nepal’s best traditional artists. Go to the website to start the tour of the museum.

World Press Photo

Browse through the World Press Photo’s archive of powerful award-winning press photographs and photo stories from around the world.

QUARANTINE DINING



Keventers

Hankering for a cold shake on long summer afternoons? Stick with the classics, or take a risk and order the Bubblegum shake. Choose from Keventers’ menu on Foodmandu. *Delivery: 12pm-6:30pm, 9843402636*

The Yard

The Yard has a variety of cuisine covered, from the Nepali Sukuti Sandheko to Fish and Chips and Chicken Schnitzel. Look at the menu at Chito Mitho and order. *Delivery: 1pm-6pm (01) 5532965*




Bhumi

Experience authentic Newa flavours of *bara*, *chatamari*, *samaya baji*, *momo cha* and more. Head on to Facebook to look at Bhumi’s menu. *Delivery: 12pm-6:45pm, 9863328781*

Dhokaima Cafe

Miss the momos? Your favourite watering hole is back to make home deliveries through Foodmandu 8AM-7pm. *Delivery: 11pm-6pm (01) 01-5522113*



Pho99

Enjoy a wide variety of mouthwatering Vietnamese food including cold noodles, deep fried spring rolls, Vietnamese salads and curries, along with Vietnam’s national staple, the delicious Pho. Check out the menu on Foodmandu. *Delivery: 12pm-6:30pm, 9818441441, 9802043330*



Zen Bistro

Take a look at Zen Bistro’s menu on Facebook and order the best of Thai food, from delicious Pad Thai to flavourful curries, seafood, and soups. *Delivery: 12pm-7pm (01) 4017654, 9841406038*




QATAR

AIRWAYS

القطرية


Going places together - qatarairways.com



KATHMANDU


This pre-monsoon has been a season of cyclones. First Amphan then Nisarga, and another circulation has hit the Odisha coastline. This is the harbinger of the monsoon, and it will push the annual rains up to eastern India where it will curl westwards to enter eastern Nepal in the next two weeks -- a week behind schedule. But before that the westerlies will prevail, bringing isolated afternoon showers, some of it stormy.

FRIDAY




27°
20°

SATURDAY



27°
21°

SUNDAY



27°
21°

AIR QUALITY INDEX

KATHMANDU, 5 - 11 June

301 – 500 Hazardous							
201 – 300 Very Unhealthy							
151 – 200 Unhealthy							
101 – 150 Unhealthy for sensitive groups							
50 – 100 Moderate							
0 – 50 Good							

PM2.5

FRIDAY
June 5

SATURDAY
June 6

SUNDAY
June 7

MONDAY
June 8

TUESDAY
June 9


WEDNESDAY
June 10

THURSDAY
June 11

The daily average for the concentration of most harmful fine suspended particles in Kathmandu’s air was much lower throughout the week, bringing the Air Quality Index (AQI) down to the yellow ‘moderate’ zone. Daily average AQI spiked to three digits at 100 only once, on Tuesday. However, with the gradual opening of the lockdown, AQI is expected to rise, although some of this impact will be reduced by the onset of the rainy season. Hope now rests on the annual monsoon rains, which is at least a week behind schedule this year. <https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/>


ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI



DONATE

Getting rid of stuff, when we don’t like waste, can be a challenge. When we have things we no longer want or need, a good option is to donate the items. We can re-home items directly with individuals or give them to charities and charity shops. Online platforms like Gumtree, Craigslist and swap and barter groups on Facebook are some other options. Sometimes when items are broken, has missing parts or has been worn out there might still be some community groups or charities which could find some use for them. For example, craft and arts groups may need broken crockery to make mosaics and animal rescue centres could accept towels, sheets and other bedding. #FridaysForFuture



DARK


ALL EPISODES DECEMBER 1

NETFLIX

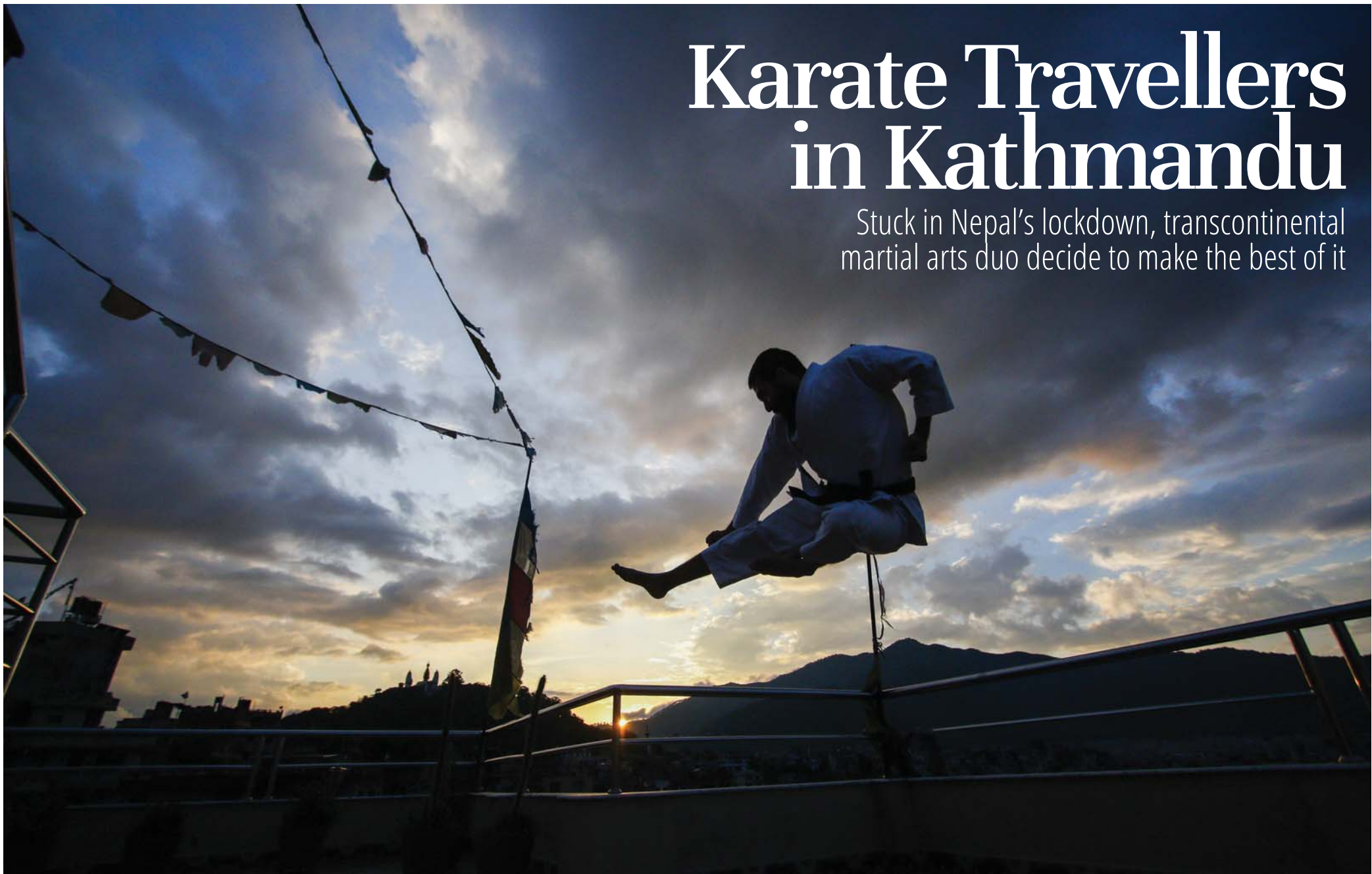
OUR PICK

Children start vanishing from a German town, setting four families on a frantic hunt for answers as they unearth a sinister time travel conspiracy that spans three generations. One could binge on the first two seasons of the *Dark*, the first ever-German language Netflix original series while waiting for the third and the final instalment to this critically acclaimed thriller starring supremely talented Louis Hofmann.

बालबालिका माथि हुने हिंसा, दुर्व्यवहार, शोषण भएको, जोखिमपूर्ण अवस्थामा रहेको वा बालअधिकारको उल्लंघन भएको छ भने बाल हेल्पलाइनको पैसा नलाग्ने फोन: नं. १०९८ मा खबर गरौं ।



नेपाल सरकार
सञ्चार तथा सूचना प्रविधि मन्त्रालय
सूचना तथा प्रसारण विभाग



ALL PHOTOS: MONIKA DEUPALA



Monika Deupala

Their names are so unpronounceable for Nepalis that Gereltungalog Erdenetsogt has the nickname ‘Ge’, and Giovanni Viradi calls himself ‘Gio’. The two world travellers have been stuck in Nepal since March because of the COVID-19 lockdown, but like it so much here that they have decided not to be repatriated on evacuation flights. Ge and Gio met last year in Laos, and were immediately drawn to each other by their passion for the martial arts. They came to Nepal on a trek, have been here ever since, teaching children karate and taekwondo.

“We considered going back, but Nepal made us feel at home and there are really good people who have been helpful,” says Ge, who is from Mongolia. Gio is from Italy and says it did not make sense going back to his country



at a time when the coronavirus pandemic was at its peak. Despite their different cultural backgrounds, the two are united by their zeal for martial arts. Besides giving martial arts tutorials to children in an orphanage in Panauti, the two have also been regularly recording a ‘Quarantine Self-defence Series’

on the terrace of their house in Swayambhu and posting it on the Internet. “Karate can have a social focus and can be used as a powerful tool for the empowerment of women and for anti-bullying campaigns,” says Ge, who adds that the lockdown period in Nepal has given them time to



train, meditate and reassess their lives. Ge, 32, was brought up in a nomadic lifestyle in the Mongolian steppe, got tired of a sedentary career in Shanghai and quit for a backpack life. On the other side of the world, thirty four-year-old Gio also quit his job as a chef in England and also headed out into the world. Their separate trajectories brought them together in Laos last year, and they decided to explore Asia, pursue their interest in the martial arts. “I was hooked to Bruce Lee movies when I was a kid, and did not like cartoons,” recalls Gio. “Dad even took me to a karate dojo and encouraged me to take part in tournaments.” Ge is also sporty, is experienced in taekwondo and nunchaku, and the two are a perfect fit. The two put on their dobok karate robes every morning, set their tripod on the terrace to record their choreographed karate tutorials with a backdrop of the stupa on the hill, and post them online. They are also known by their Instagram handle, Karate Travellers. Every Asian country has its own karate tradition, and the two train with locals to learn

the nuances, and add to their repertoire. Gio explains: “We started to use karate as cross-cultural bridge and martial arts as language to communicate with people from different cultures, and for self-improvement.” For free-spirited travellers like Ge and Gio, the lockdown could have been like prison, but they have turned it to their advantage. Says Ge: “We decided to make lemonade out of sour lemon by keeping our minds busy and our body fit.” With Nepal’s international flight ban set to be lifted in three weeks, the two may not have to wait much longer to go out into the world again. 🇳🇵



Meet Gio and Ge, the unlikely martial arts aficionados who have been stuck in Nepal after the lockdown and decided to use the time to train children in karate and taekwondo and record online tutorials.

Himalayan New Yorkers tell

Nepalis, Tibetans, and other Himalayan natives in New York’s Queens neighbourhoods speak of being at the epicentre of the epicentre



Tibetan Community of New York and New Jersey members serve food at Elmhurst Hospital.



Lhakpa takes a selfie, feeling scared, after caring for her first COVID-19 patient on 3/16.



Dr. Kunchog prepares medicines for his COVID-19 patients.

Nawang Tsering Gurung, Ross Perlin, Mark Turin, Sienna R Craig, Maya Daurio, and Daniel Kaufman

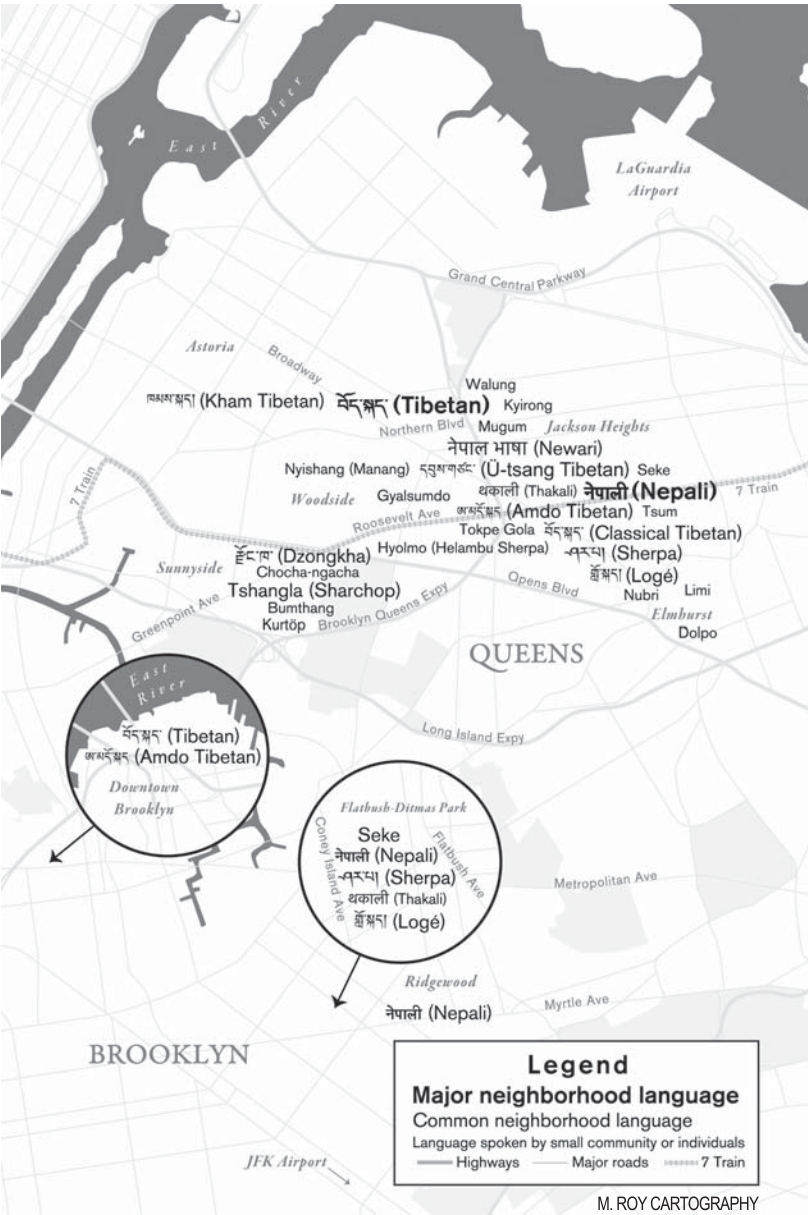
A nurse coming down with the virus herself, an expectant mother, a public health expert putting his training to use, a teacher navigating the new world of online classes, and an *amchi* (Tibetan doctor) trying to help frightened patients. Lhakpa, Diki, Sangey, Yeshi, and Kunchog are just five Himalayan New Yorkers, but their stories of daily life over the last few months contain more lived experience of the current crisis than a thousand headlines and statistics.

Since March 2020, New York City has been a global epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic. Largely unreported is the fact that thousands of Nepalis, Tibetans, and other Himalayan natives have been at the epicentre of the epidemic, living and working in the Queens neighbourhoods where the virus has hit the hardest. Just launched and still evolving, ‘New York COVID-19: Diverse Diaries from a City Under Siege’ is the first concerted attempt to document the impact of the pandemic on this often invisible community.

Nearly every day since April, as many as 10 Himalayan New Yorkers from all walks of life — including Lhakpa, Diki, Sangey, Yeshi, and Kunchog — have been recording short audio-diaries from home in their mother tongues (Nepali, Tibetan variants from across northern Nepal to eastern Tibet, and Dzongkha), with English summaries added later to reach a wider audience.

This growing multimedia record — nearly 300 entries totalling dozens of hours — presents a unique portrait of the daily struggles faced by doctors, nurses, and essential workers; the immense pressures on elders, parents and children under quarantine; and the new ways that Himalayan New Yorkers are aiding not just their own struggling communities, but their neighbours and fellow citizens.

‘New York COVID-19’ is a unique collaboration between diarists committed to sharing their experiences and a distributed



Himalayan language communities in New York City. Map does not include numerous other language communities from Nepal, and dozens from around the world, which live in close proximity.

group of scholars who first came together in 2016 to create Voices of the Himalaya, a project documenting the extraordinary diversity and vitality of Himalayan New York through oral history interviews in a dozen languages.

Beginning with Nawang Tsering Gurung, a young social entrepreneur and community mobiliser originally from the village of Ghiling in Upper Mustang the team now brings together long-time scholars of Nepal, Mark Turin and Sienna Craig; Turin’s doctoral student Maya Daurio, herself a geographer and GIS specialist with Nepal experience; and linguists

Ross Perlin and Daniel Kaufman from the NYC-based non-profit Endangered Language Alliance, which is committed to supporting linguistic diversity in the city and beyond.

One of the first COVID-19 deaths in the city, on March 23, was that of Anil Subba, a Nepali immigrant and Uber driver in his 40s living in Jackson Heights. By early April, members of the Queens Nepali community alone were reporting hundreds of people seriously ill, including several needing intensive care, with the number of cases still growing rapidly. At the same time, the

Urgent Nepali Aid Network for COVID-19 was established as an early mutual aid effort, and an estimated 400 to 500 Tibetan nurses began organising for the pandemic, including many at Elmhurst Hospital, which was described as the city’s “number one priority” by NYC mayor Bill de Blasio due to the surge of cases there.

The Queens neighbourhoods of Jackson Heights, Elmhurst, and Corona were emerging as the hardest-hit zone in the hardest-hit county in the United States, by sheer caseload, with some 64,000 confirmed cases and over six thousand fatalities recorded in a



population of around 330,000 (as of 10 June). Central Queens is also among the most culturally and linguistically diverse urban areas on Earth, and includes one of the largest Himalayan communities outside of Asia.

As the disproportionate impact of the virus in Queens started to become clear, our team responded with a plan to help ensure that the Himalayan experience would not remain invisible or be forgotten — by recording and elevating, in real time, the voices of those living through the virus. Free and open to all for non-commercial use, the audio-diaries form just one part of an emerging project which also includes 20 ethnographic interviews with Himalayan community leaders; multilingual materials relating to the pandemic and community responses; and a distinct but closely related effort to map the city’s languages.

Community members, first responders, scholars, policymakers, and the general public form the intended audience for this work — both to inform people about what is happening right now, and to increase understanding in the likely event of future public health and socioeconomic crises.

The diaries make clear that all Himalayan New Yorkers have been affected by a crisis that is more than just a virus. This is also a mental health epidemic, an economic emergency, and an

ongoing and lived experience with unprecedented levels of uncertainty. With the virus finally ebbing in New York — 400,000 confirmed cases and 30,000 deaths later — the toll of COVID-19 on the Himalayan community (subsumed under ‘Asian-American’ in the public health statistics) is still unclear.

What is certain is that most people know or are related to at least one person, probably many, who have fallen seriously ill or died. As the ‘New York COVID-19’ project makes clear, many were sick and recovered at home without being diagnosed; others are uncertain whether they were ill, or may still be uncomfortable admitting it; many are still understandably anxious; and all have been affected, directly or indirectly, by the socioeconomic crisis that is unfolding in tandem with the pandemic.

Despite these challenges, the community is extraordinarily resilient — and is developing new strengths in response to the crisis. The diarists report an intensification of family and community ties and religious practices that were already strong, widespread adherence to and respect for public health measures, and creative mutual aid efforts and community responses that have included individual check-ups on the ill, internet-based programming for isolated elders, organised efforts to navigate complex government services for which little non-English language help is available, and much more.

Indeed, beyond organising and taking care of its own, Himalayan New Yorkers have been going much further in their professional roles as healthcare professionals, essential workers, and service providers as well as in their social capacities as good neighbours. Along with so much else, the diaries testify to the growing power and visibility of a Himalayan community in New York City that is now also a focal point of the global Himalayan diaspora. Have a listen. 🎧

 nepalitimes.com

Go online for multimedia content, including audio versions of the testimonies.

stories of COVID-19



Diki Bista (Loke),
2 April 2020, Expectant Mother

I woke up, washed my face, brushed my teeth, and did basic prayers while making water and incense offerings. I prepared breakfast, and while eating, I did a WeChat video call with my family, to where my mother is in Kathmandu. Even in Nepal, they are all staying at home.

After talking with my family, I cleaned up the breakfast dishes, cleaned the house, and did yoga for forty minutes. I also go to college, but at the moment, all the classes are online, and there are many assignments — I tried to spend an hour doing an assignment. Then I made lunch, ate it while watching a movie. I did a walk or light run inside the apartment for thirty minutes. And today I don't have to prepare dinner because a friend living on the Upper West Side made us some delicious Newa food and came all the way to Woodside to drop it off here. I used to eat Newa food a lot with my Newa friends in Nepal but I've never tasted it in America.

Now when we see the news, in America, the scariest area is our place: Queens. It's a 15-minute walk from our home to Elmhurst Hospital, full of patients. I can't do anything, just stay at home and pray. Most of our Mustang people are also in this neighbourhood, most of them are staying at home, watching various Dharma teaching videos and praying...



Sangey Tashi (Kham Tibetan),
26 May 2020, Public Health Expert

Today I went to my work. It was my first day back to work after the lockdown. Every quarter we have a meeting, and today was this quarter's. I took the subway instead of taking my car because it would be difficult to park it. In the subway, it wasn't crowded, and I felt like it was safe since people were maintaining social distance.

My office is in Lower Manhattan and there were far fewer people around on my way there. Around 4:30 p.m., I came out of my work meeting. Usually around this time the streets would be packed due to rush hour, but now that is not the case. Quite a few people hang around the Fulton Street Station, but I saw very few of them today. Even those taking the train are all wearing masks, it's rare to see people without one.



Yeshi Jigme Gangne (Central Tibetan),
4 May 2020, Language Teacher

I'm not feeling well, and my hair is getting longer, so I cut my hair and my father-in-law's hair as well. While barbering, I feel a terrible stomach pain and it gets difficult to breathe too. But during this crisis, it's scary to go to the hospital, so I tried to stay home. My wife is also not feeling well today. I don't really know why, but it seems connected to staying at home for days on end — and it's been seventy days that I've been staying at home. I've just gone out several times quickly to do some grocery shopping.

There is the demand and desire to leave the house, but we're stuck here out of fear. And then there's the fluctuation in our schedules — it's now 12 pm, and usually I used to wake up at 5 or 6 am, but now I wake up very late, and it's not only my family, but most people are facing something similar.

Today my children were really insisting that we let them play in the backyard, but we didn't let them leave the house and they were both screaming. For us, at least we get some fresh air from our deck, but we don't get much sunlight. We need the sunlight on our bodies... There is a saying in Buddhism that we don't know whether we will wake up tomorrow or not, so we have to practice Dharma today.



Lhakpa Dolma Sherpa (Nepali),
16 April 2020, Hospital Nurse

I work at Elmhurst Hospital, Queens, New York, as a nurse in the Medical Surgical unit. Currently I am in self-quarantine after I was infected with the COVID-19 on April 3...

Today I feel a little better, I don't have a fever and I feel a little more energetic. The COVID-19 symptoms begin with fever, cough, and difficulty in breathing. My father lives in one room and I in the other in the same apartment, keeping social distance. During this crisis, my father has helped a lot. He always leaves a thermo full of hot water with lemon, and another with hot water with turmeric. In the morning, my father has been calling me from the door, "Lhakpa Dolma," and then I get up and get the thermos.

Today for breakfast, my father prepared toast and eggs. I haven't actually seen my father for many days. We always talk via phone and FaceTime. My father prepares the food and leaves it outside the door. It's been more than 13 days that I've been in this room. My father and I do share the bathroom, and what I do is first put on the mask and gloves, and go to the bathroom, and clean the entire bathroom with Clorox and then come back to my room.

Every morning, I call my family: my mother, sister and her husband's family are in California. Everyone over there is also worried about me. Every morning, we spend an hour or two together on a group video call on Instagram. I also contact my cousins and my maternal aunt, I try to contact everyone. During this self-quarantine, what I've realised is that we take so many things for granted...



Dr. Kunchog Tseten (Amdo Tibetan),
7 May 2020, Tibetan Doctor

Many people in New York City are suffering from a wide range of physical and emotional conditions, exacerbated by quarantine and the ongoing pandemic. The most prominent of their complaints are anxiety, stress, and depression.

These extraordinary circumstances deprive many people of the space and time they need to sustain an exercise routine. As a result, we are hearing about muscle spasms, upper back pains, chest pain, and so on.

When they come to me looking for suggestions to alleviate these pains, I have been asking them to do full body prostrations. If the patient is not religious, they may prefer to do physical movements such as yoga.

Beyond movement, I have also been suggesting to them certain changes in their diets. For emotional problems including insomnia, it is good to take one teaspoon of nutmeg powder in bone broth before sleep.

Generally speaking, it's not necessary to fear the pandemic in the absence of diabetes, respiratory disease, or other chronic illness. Those who are healthy and strong need not panic about this pandemic. (Of course it is important to take every necessary precaution for the sake of public health.)

Here I will share some ideas about the treatment of emotional conditions by parsing them not only as 'disorders of the life-force wind', as Tibetan Medicine commonly describes them, but sometimes as disorders of the phlegm, or as hidden fevers in the heart. After that I will also mention certain common formulas for their treatment...

TATA MOTORS
Connecting Aspirations

TATA

REFLECTS SAFETY IN ALL WAYS

TATA NEXON, THE SAFEST SUV

★★★★★
GLOBAL NCAP
5 STAR SAFETY RATING

*Conditions Apply



MONIKA DEUPALA

Repatriation flights for Nepalis stranded abroad finally begin amidst mixed messages, flouted guidelines

Upasana Khadka

After outrage on social media about the government not following its own guidelines about repatriating Nepali migrants from abroad, stranded and desperate workers are finally beginning to come home this week.

Faced with criticism over ad hoc repatriation flights, the government has after nearly three months of lockdown announced a tentative list of chartered flights to bring back Nepalis stranded abroad. On Thursday, the first two flights following the government's pre-planned schedule and chartered by the Kuwait government, landed with undocumented workers.

The 324 female passengers in two flights from Kuwait City who arrived in Kathmandu Thursday had spent 45 days in transit camps set up by the Kuwait government for amnestied undocumented workers. Of the 7,000 undocumented Nepalis, half opted for the amnesty, and are being flown home phasewise on Jazeera Airways.

There was outrage in social media last week after the first flights on 5 June from UAE and Burma brought back passengers who were not on the priority list of those needing immediate evacuation. The list included undocumented and laid off workers, women, pregnant and disabled Nepalis and



those stranded after short-term visas expired. Then, on Tuesday night, 11 Nepalis were flown back on a Nepal Airlines direct flight from Canberra which had dropped Australians and New Zealanders stuck in Nepal.

"When the government first announced that repatriations would begin a couple of weeks back, we were very jubilant," says Laxmi, a Nepali worker on the phone from Kuwait. "Every evening for a few days, we danced to some happy Nepali music."

But soon, the dancing stopped and the exhilaration turned to frustration as the days dragged on and there was no word about the flights. Nepalis in an all-male quarantine started raising slogans against the embassy and the Nepal government, taking to social media to protest.

"We at least get decent food and have air conditioning in the school where we have our camp, there are some men in camps in the desert who have it worse," Laxmi adds.

There is even more anger in UAE, which has 17,375 stranded Nepalis who have registered to return, but the ones who came back last week were not from the embassy's priority list. Some of them marched to the Nepal Embassy in Abu Dhabi to protest, and had to be dispersed by police (*photo*).

"The embassy does not pick



up our phone, how else are we supposed to reach them?" asks one Nepali undocumented worker who has been providing updates to *Nepali Times* over the past weeks. "They called the police, and sent us back without any information."

The 5 June flight permission was obtained on the assumption that the UAE government would sponsor the airfare of the most vulnerable Nepalis selected by the Embassy in Abu Dhabi, including pregnant women. Instead, the plan veered and the lapses in communication and coordination led to two companies using that permission to charter the flight to take their employees back to Nepal.

For workers in Kuwait or the UAE, the hardest part has been the uncertainty and the waiting game with the lack of clear communication and the mixed messages driven by speculation on social media. The government on Wednesday finally published a timetable for evacuation flights that includes cities in the Gulf, Malaysia as well as the US, UK, Australia, Japan and southeast Asia.

In Kuwait, Laxmi says the wait was getting unbearable. "They assure us that flights will resume, but it never happens. I have packed and unpacked my bag three times. Why doesn't the government just publish a schedule of flights and

LONG JOURNEY HOME:

Undocumented female workers from Nepal lived in this transit centre in Kuwait City for 45 days before they were flown home on Thursday (*far left*).

Of them, 324 women arrived on two flights at Kathmandu airport on Thursday to be greeted by media persons recording their transfer to holding centres (*above*).

Meanwhile, at least 17,000 Nepalis are waiting in the UAE for repatriation. Some of them at the Nepal Embassy in Abu Dhabi last week to register for flights home (*left*).

stop this suspense?"

Miya is also an undocumented worker in the UAE, who got a letter from the embassy last month with written assurance that he will be put on the first flight home. When the 5 June flight took off, he was not on it. But he was shocked to find that his local government in Gorkha had him on the passenger manifest of the first flight who needed to be quarantined. He asks, "Does no one owe me an explanation?"

Besides the lack of communication and coordination, there are also practical shortcomings in the repatriation strategy. The Nepal government has said that the air fare of returnees should be paid by the workers and has published a price list for tickets, but many have used up all their savings and the charter flights are more expensive.

"How can a jobless worker reliant on charity for food for months be expected to afford tickets?" asks a UAE-based Nepali community leader.

The other government requirement is that returnees should have a certificate proving negative COVID-19 status, but workers in the Gulf countries including the UAE say that is challenging. None of the passengers on the first flight from Sharjah were tested.

For the last 10 weeks, the government did not allow its

nationals home because it said it needed to prepare for their return. But the first flights last week showed that even with the Nepal Army in charge, the preparations were inadequate with ad hoc decisions on who got to fly back first, no evidence of ramped up PCR tests on arrival, and under-equipped quarantine centres in the districts that could be hotbeds for the disease.

About 25,000 Nepalis are expected to fly back in the next few weeks, and experts say embassies need to communicate more frequently and clearly with workers about their flight status, the government in Kathmandu needs to coordinate better between ministries, and provide help to workers who cannot afford to buy tickets and do not have employer or host country support.

Nepal's embassies abroad are under severe resource constraints, and have to carry out what is directed by the decision makers in Kathmandu. But there is a sore need for transparency in the selection process with frequent and honest updates. There is now a semblance of order with the timetable and ticket price list published, but there is still a chance of those with clout cutting the queue.

Thursday's two Jazeera Airways flights full of undocumented Nepali female workers was paid for by the Kuwaiti government. Rita, a Nepali worker who has spent the past one-and-a-half months at the transit camp set up by the Kuwait government was on the flight because she is pregnant.

"It is bittersweet for me. I can't wait to go home but my husband is also in Kuwait although not part of the amnesty program as he is documented. He is stuck in his room without work and would have gone home with me had it been possible," Rita said on the phone. "The baby is still four months away, so I am hopeful that he will be able to join me in Nepal to welcome our daughter."

Some names have been changed.