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BHARAT BANDHU THAPA

where that was not possible, decided that either rivers or the Himalayan watershed was the border.

Photographer Bharat Bandhu Thapa who trekked through the region four years ago remembers looking down from Lapcha Pass, a wide meadow on the border ridge, and taking pictures of two houses (*left*).

This is one of the few points in Nepal from where Lake Mansarovar and Mt Kailash are visible, and it is clear from the images that the Chinese structures are down the northern side of the Pass.

“I remember locals telling me the houses were in China, and that the army post further down was built after the Chinese found out there were people moving across Lapcha Pass because it was an easy place to cross between Tibet and Nepal,” Thapa recalls. “They said the Chinese never gave locals any trouble, but would stop outsiders.”

HIGH FRONTIER: Houses built by the Chinese as seen from Lapcha Pass in 2016 with Lake Mansarovar visible in the distance (*left*).

Photograph of the same place last month (*below*) with the new Chinese compound. In the distance, Mt Kailash and Mansarovar.

Map of the Nepal-China border showing location of Border Pillars 11 and 12, Lapcha Pass and the Hilsa checkpoint.

Borderline

Nabaraj Mahatara in Humla

Last month, reports emerged in the Indian media that the Chinese had built seven structures in a ‘disputed’ border area between China and Nepal in Humla district.

This was not the first time the area on Lapcha Pass (5,018m) on the ridge between Limi Valley and Tibet had been in the news. After the Chinese built two houses there in 2015, a Nepali team had concluded that it was indeed inside China as per the 1962 border demarcation, and the matter was laid to rest.

However, after the Lipu Lekh row between Nepal and India in April, security forces from the Nepali side had stepped up

patrols along the Nepal-India and Nepal-China borders, and had been inspecting border pillars.

One team last month saw that the Chinese had built a new compound with seven houses near border pillar #12 at Lapcha Pass on Limi Valley, and reported this back to Kathmandu, which ordered the Chief District Officer of Humla to go inspect the area.

On Monday, a Nepali security team reached the compound, and were told by a Chinese soldier with a hand-held hailer to go back. The person who spoke English was then removed, and his Chinese superior started speaking in Mandarin, brandishing a map.

This encounter hit the headlines in Kathmandu on Wednesday morning. There was even a sudden demonstration outside the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu with banners that said ‘Back Of China’ (*sic*) that was dispersed by police.

Minister of Foreign Affairs and government spokesperson

Pradeep Gyawali went into damage control and told a press briefing on Wednesday evening: “In 2015, our team visited the site and made a field report saying that the structures were 1km inside Chinese territory ... Nepal does not have any border dispute with China.”

Later at night, the Chinese Embassy spokesperson in Kathmandu also clarified: “There is proof that the houses shown in media reports are on Chinese side ... it can be further verified if Nepal wants. We do not have any border disagreement with Nepal.”

The team that went to Lapcha then trekked westward along the border to Hilsa, and on Tuesday located Border Pillar #11 which was half-buried in snow and dirt at an elevation of 5,202m on Takule peak.

Survey expert Budhhi Narayan Shrestha says the 1962 demarcation resolved many of the contested areas between Nepal and China, erected pillars, and

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The 'F' word

On 19 September, Nepal marked Constitution Day. It was on this day five years ago that the Constitution was hurriedly promulgated by a government facing severe criticism for being slow to respond to the deadly earthquakes earlier in 2015.

There was dissatisfaction with the draft Constitution in parts of the Tarai, but Prime Minister Sushil Koirala fast-tracked it despite India's articulation of Madhesi concerns. The result was a blockade that lasted five months and devastated Nepal's economy.

Today, the economy has been wrecked by an even bigger crisis. As masked and physically distanced dignitaries gathered last Saturday at the Tundikhel parade ground, Nepal Army helicopters showered rose petals on them – while at the adjacent Khula Manch, 600 out-of-work and hungry people were being fed by youth volunteers.

There could not have been a greater irony. The Khula Manch was where pro-democracy protesters gathered in 1990 and again in 2006 against absolutist monarchies.

Fast forward five years, we have a farce despite the Constitution having a progressive preamble, provisions for affirmative action, a commitment to abolish structural discrimination and protect social, economic and political rights.

The Constitution took one step forward, but the state has taken two steps back – especially after the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) government came to power. Not only are issues like transitional justice, impunity, freedom of expression, tolerance of dissent, independence of the judiciary ignored, but there is a pandemic of corruption.

The public was increasingly fed up with the government's poor performance even before Covid-19, but in the past six months it has failed miserably to handle the welfare of the country's most vulnerable.

We have often argued in this space against declaring Nepal a 'federal' state. Whatever it is called, genuine decentralisation and workable political devolution was more important for development and service delivery – whether it was during the Panchayat, the post-1990 era, or in the transition period after the war.

Indeed, development got a boost after the

decentralisation and local self-governance acts went into effect in the 1990s. Giving communities a stake in decision-making led to direct improvements in living standards in many districts.

But 'federalism' became synonymous with 'peace' because that was why the war was waged, and later it was the price to be paid to meet demands for regional and ethnic autonomy. Political parties haggled for nearly a decade about how many federal provinces there should be, which way they should be demarcated, and what to name them, (some still have numbers). As it turned out, the boundaries of post-2017 'provinces' roughly resemble the Panchayat-era anchal, and Bagmati, Karnali and Gandaki even carry the

same river names.

The 'F' word became politically correct. But the past five years have shown that no matter what you call it, power in Nepal is as Kathmandu-centric as ever. In fact, there was probably more genuine devolution in the 1990s than

now under federalism.

We should have known. Communists through modern history (Soviet Union, China under Mao) have used federalism as a façade to continue with their ideology of 'democratic centralism'. No wonder, that the NCP, which has more power than any other recent government has centralised it not just in Singha Darbar but inside one room in Baluwater.

Except Province 2, all others are governed by the NCP. Provincial leaders therefore have more allegiance to the party headquarters from where all power emanates.

As our report on Covid-19 shows (*page 10*), the way Province 2 and Tarai municipalities handled testing and contact tracing during the pandemic is a lesson for Kathmandu. The pandemic has shown that decentralisation improves government response in a crisis.

Now that we are stuck with a federal state, let us try to make the best of it by practicing what it really means: true devolution of decision-making, effective service delivery, and resource distribution to local governments.

Whether it is called federalism or whatever, true devolution improves governance, especially during the pandemic



BHANU BHATTARAI

ONLINE PACKAGES



WHEN THERE WERE NO PLANES

In this latest episode of Walkabout with Anil, take a look back at a time when three legendary figures travelled from Wutaishan to Kathmandu, Pataliputra to Lumbini and Kathmandu to London: Manjushree, Emperor Ashok and Jang Bahadur Rana. Watch full video on the *Nepali Times* YouTube channel.

KULMAN GHISING

We must elect him MP and then see what comes out of it ('Transformer Man', editorial, #1028).

Amit Kshetri

• Why stop at MP or minister? Ghising appears to have the management nous, moral integrity and popularity to be Nepal's first Tamang PM – if any party would support him.

Keith D Leslie

• Nepali politics is corrupted so he must not join it. He won't be able to do what he wants.

Neeran Basnet

• Our leaders are corrupt and shameless. They will tear Kulman apart conspiring against him and won't hesitate to put him behind the bars.

Saisab Parajuli

TED RICCARDI

Ted Riccardi was a much-revered friend of the Nepali community in New York and a giant among Nepal experts. I learned much from him. May he continue to bestow his wise guidance from heaven, and may his soul rest in eternal peace.

Kul Gautam

LANDSLIDES

So saddened to read this ('Deadly monsoon in Nepal turns deadlier', Ramesh Bhusal, nepalitimes.com). Even more so to realise a relentless drive for progress causes additional suffering to your people.

Hans Hoefler

CONSTITUTION DAY

Everything seems irrelevant when people are going hungry not far from Singha Darbar (Youth-led feeding campaign', Nunata Rai, nepalitimes.com). There is an urgent need to tackle hunger. Anything else is bad PR.

Gyurme Dondup

• What good is a Constitution when it does not protect and promote the values of the indigenous people nor provide an opportunity to enhance their lives. People don't need a pompous self-centred PM to praise a constitution he neither practices nor understands. The constitution and rule of law should be fair and no one should be above it.

Deo Prakash Lama

WALKABOUT WITH ANIL

I absolutely love Anil Chitrakar's insights on our heritage ('Walkabout with Anil: Chiba', nepalitimes.com). I wonder how many people really know these details. Keep doing these videos, we love them.

Raveen Shrestha

• Learning about the Buddha's teachings and Kathmandu Valley through sculptures. Thanks Anil Chitrakar for sharing your wisdom. Thanks also to *Nepali Times* for coordinating the walkabouts.

Ravindra Shakya

• This video on *chiba* carried a deep meaning. Thanks for the beautiful content.

Rabins XP

• Once I return from Australia, I will be looking at these structures closely and with more understanding.

Owen Martin

COVID-19

While travelling from the US to Kathmandu, our PCR tests already expired on the way ('Landing in Kathmandu is only half the story', Tufan Neupane, nepalitimes.com). We live in Florida and had to travel on our own to Washington DC. We were advised to arrive a day earlier and stay overnight in Washington. When we finally arrived in Kathmandu, there was big chaos while filling CCMC forms at the airport. Things could have very simply been made a lot simpler.

Swaran Thapa

• It is true that Covid-19 is also lessening the loss of life from traffic accidents and air pollution. An insightful analysis ('How Covid-19 saves lives in Nepal', Sonia Awale, nepalitimes.com)

Colette Moreau

• Very good observation linking the fall in highway fatalities to deaths from Covid-19. Kudos to the writer.

Rk Pradhan

• This is one interesting way to look at things.

Raj Tamang

Times.com

WHAT'S TRENDING



Transformer man

Editorial

Just as well Kulman Ghising's tenure is not renewed at the NEA, he can do even more by entering politics and shaming the non-performing leaders who are jealous of his popularity. Most readers were on board, and sent in their thoughts. Go online to read feedback.



Most reached and shared on Facebook



Most commented



Rare anti-cancer tree on verge of extinction

by Kumar Paudel

The Himalaya is a treasure trove of medicinal plants, many of which have not even been scientifically studied. But one rare tree, Maire's yew, with its anti-cancer property is on the verge of extinction. Read full piece on nepalitimes.com



Most popular on Twitter



Caught on camera: Nepal's rare fishing cat

by Swechhya Shrestha

Threatened by destruction of wetlands, fishing cat population has declined at an alarming rate within all range countries. But recent camera trap images from Nepal's Kapilvastu confirm the existence of this endangered feline. More details in this report on our website.



Most visited online page

QUOTE TWEETS



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Rare anti-cancer tree on verge of extinction
Only few hundred Maire's yew trees are left in #Nepal's mountain wilderness, and needs urgent protection, writes @kmrpaudel of @GreenhoodNepal.



Reshu Bashyal @bashyalreshu
A fascinating piece on Taxus! Delighted that @NepaliTimes covered this remarkable (and pressing) issue. Only when we are mindful of its significance, we start appreciating them- the first step in conservation. I absolutely enjoyed reading it! #Taxiling #WeAreCLP



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
Remembering Nepal's conservation heroes @WWFNepal country representative @ghanagr's personal account of the Ghunsa crash on 23 September 2006 and how new generation of Nepali #conservationists was inspired by the pioneering work of those who perished.



UK in Nepal @UKinNepal
Remembering #Nepal's pioneering conservation heroes who passed away tragically 15 years ago. Important to celebrate their lives by building on the crucial work they did on conservation & #ClimateChange. #COP26



Neelima Shrestha @NeelimaShr
Nicely written @ghanagr "Fifteen years down the line, Nepal has taken great strides in conservation despite the tragedy, and despite facing multiple challenges since." Continuing the legacy of Dr. Gurung and other conservation heroes, they are smiling down from heaven



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes
EDITORIAL: Transformer Man
Kulman Ghising should not be renewed as MD. He can be an MP. Perhaps, even an Energy Minister someday.



JM Limbu @jm_limbu
He will have my vote for sure. Nepal needs thousands of Kulman Ghising working in every sector. #kulmanghising #Nepal



Bkbu @Bb3k
I believe he should be appointed to KUKL so that no one has to wake up at middle of the night for a bucket of water.

20 YEARS AGO THIS WEEK

Twenty years ago on #11 of *Nepali Times* (27 September-3 October 2000) the paper's first page and editorial covered the audacious Maoist attack on the Dolpo district headquarter of Dunai. This was the first ever attack on a district headquarter in the war that had started in 1996, and must have required complicated logistics and military strategy. About 1,000 guerrillas waged the 6-hour-long battle leaving 14 policemen dead, 41 wounded, and 12 missing, presumed taken prisoner. The surprising thing was that while Dunai was under attack, the Royal Nepal Army in a nearby barracks made no move to help the policemen being slaughtered. The Army only entered the war a year later.

Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda) then issued a statement blaming the government for not agreeing to peace talks even though his group was ready. In January 2020, Dahal finally said his party took responsibility of "only" 5,000 of the 17,000 Nepalis killed during the insurgency.

The editorial, 'Fiddling while Dolpo Burns' was sharply critical of the government's incompetence and mishandling of the Dunai attack. This edition 20 years ago also carried a profile feature of Chandra Gurung who was then heading WWF Nepal, and was a pioneer conservationist. He died exactly six years later in the Ghunsa helicopter crash.

Excerpts:

Who's in charge?: Postmortem of the daring Maoist attack on the Dolpo district headquarter in Dunai on Monday has raked up a host of unanswered questions which point to the police and army working at cross-purposes. At the root of this crisis is growing friction between the govern-ment and the palace that is beginning to shape Nepal's present polity. A deepening crisis will benefit anti-democratic forces of the left and the right who can take advantage of the ensuing chaos to take the country back to authoritarianism.



To complicate matters further, there is an intense power struggle underway within the ruling party between a faction which wants talks with the Maoists right away, and another which wants to build up police strength before talking.

Fiddling while Dolpo Burns: The Maoist leadership is just taking advantage of petty politicking between factions carefully calibrated game: having scored a major propaganda victory with their audacious attack on a district headquarter, they left without capturing it for it could have pushed the government to make one more effort to send in the Army. The military has been marking time. Army Chief Prajwal Sumsher Rana warned two weeks ago that the Royal Nepal Army could not idle away and watch the country go to rot. But he has also succeeded in putting obstacles to police weapons modernization, and the formation of a paramilitary force. He will now have to answer why policemen in Dunai were not better armed.

Mr Eco-tourism: One Nepali whose hard work contributed to the success of the Annapurna Conservation Project is Chandra Gurung. On return from Hawaii University in 1985 to complete his research paper on wildlife conservation, Chandra was asked to help in designing a project for conserving the Annapurna area. It evolved into work combining eco-tourism with conservation. Fifteen years later, it is regarded as a model for other countries. Chandra believes more than ever before that the only way to preserve nature successfully is with the active participation of the community. "Regulations need to be imposed when the community does not understand the efforts. But if the community is made a part of it then that is the key to success," Chandra told *Nepali Times*.

From the archives of *Nepali Times* of the past 20 years, site search: www.nepalitimes.com.

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Father Moran and Nepal's Jesuits

Educator and ham radio enthusiast, 9N1MM was the country's first window into the modern world

We stood uneasily on the grass beneath the spreading fig tree. Father Moran was trying to create a sense of religious formality, our excited guests were in danger of being rowdy, and I was missing the church font usually associated with christenings from my Protestant upbringing. But this was our tiny patch of Bansbari garden in 1987, and we had to make do.



SO FAR SO GOOD
Lisa Choegyol

I was carrying the precious bundle wrapped in his best, though not the trailing lace and embroidery of more traditional baptism ceremonies. The appointed god parents could not be with us so Alma, the dignified wife of Dudley Spain had offered to be surrogate godmother, and Lewis Macfarlane the American deputy was our stand-in godfather. The proceedings got underway with a blessing and some prayers as the audience settled in the spring sunshine, birdsong drifting through the lychee trees and insects busy in the flowerbeds.

Alma tried to wrestle Sangjay out of my arms, an undignified tussle ensued until I was reminded in an urgent hiss that church etiquette dictates that the godmother, not the mother, holds the child during the service. Father Moran carried on valiantly as I yielded my little treasure. Sangjay gazed typically phlegmatic throughout, the assembled friends politely pretending not to notice.

My mother professed to be shocked that our babies, Sangjay then his little brother Rinchen a couple of years later, had been baptized “by a Catholic priest, darling!”, though I don’t think she really minded. She approved that both sons had also been blessed and named by the Tibetan family Rinpoche in Swayambhunath, careful to protect our katas, offerings and babies from the monkeys, and covering all spiritual options. And like me, she greatly admired the gentle legacy of the Jesuits in Nepal, holding special respect for their leader, Father Moran.

The Society of Jesus fathers were an integral part of early expatriate life in Kathmandu, bringing gravitas to Christian community landmarks such as baptisms, confirmations, marriages and burials, as well as being great fun at the after-party. Many of them were American and most took Nepali nationality, instilling their special brand of



Fr Marshall D Moran (1906-1992) in Godavari in the 1970s with his ham radio and 9N1MM call sign that was Nepal's window on the world before long-distance telephones.

universal spirituality and essence of educational excellence without ever forcing their faith. Father Moran set the tone with his ham radio call sign, 9N1MM Mickey Mouse.

No foreign funeral was complete without the reassuring presence of a presiding Jesuit, and Boris's was no exception. At the age of 80 Boris died in 1985, inconveniently during Dasain so Jim Edwards and I had to mobilise a team of Buddhist Mountain Travel Sherpas to dig his grave in the British Cemetery – Hindus could not be tainted during the festival.

Arriving in India with only refugee papers, Boris had managed British citizenship with the help of his friend Lady Diana Duff-Cooper. He often visited the British Cemetery on daily walks from the Royal Hotel, and always intended to be buried there beside his mother and mother-in-law. He liked to say



that he knew the name on every tombstone, making the acquaintance of his future neighbours. Buried on a bright afternoon 22 October 1985, the funeral service was dramatic with Russian wailing, sobbing and embracing the coffin, despite the best efforts of Father Eugene Watrin and Father Tom Downing who conducted the service.

The Jesuits' commitment to their calling was manifested in their scholarly study, academic research and social work, resulting in books, centres and clinics where they were most needed. Their gowned silhouettes were a familiar sight around town, pursuing their devout vocations with practical ministrations. Father Moran is remembered riding his motorbike to Godavari, white robes billowing, and in his wake alarmed buffalos and excited dogs careering down the unmade road in a cloud of dust.

For Nepalis, the brothers' profound influence on education impacted on generations of privileged pupils lucky enough to attend St Xavier's and St Mary's in Godavari and Jawalakhel – Nepal's first internationally accredited schools opened in 1951 and 1955 respectively. At the initiative of the newly instated King Tribhuvan, the Jesuits literally brought modern thinking to Nepal, founding the first permanent Christian mission sanctioned in Kathmandu for nearly 200 years. This remarkable achievement was mainly due to the sheer force of personality and charisma of Father Marshall Moran.

The first European ever encountered by the Valley's Newa inhabitants was a Portuguese Jesuit, Father John Cabral, on his way from Shigatse (Xigazê) in Tibet to Bengal in early 1628. These intrepid Westerners were Jesuit monks despatched from Rome to their Catholic mission in Tibet. They

must have been a strange sight, austere travellers clothed in long capes and plain, black, ankle-length soutanes gathered at the waist with a rope.

The Jesuits' legation in Lhasa was never robust and in 1702 Pope Clement XI reassigned the mission-field of Tibet to the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin – a branch of Roman Catholic Franciscans. The Capuchins would have been instantly recognisable with their dark-brown robes, pointed hoods drawn over their heads, and untrimmed bushy black beards.

The Malla kings allowed Capuchin friars from Lhasa to live in the Valley's city states for over half a century, until they were politely sent packing by Prithivi Narayan Shah in 1769. With their centre in Bhaktapur, Raja Ranajit Malla wrote in Newari to the Pope saying that they were free to evangelise but, concerning his own conversion, he would “not be able to do it now”. The site of the Lalitpur Capuchin house and small cemetery, said to lie north of Patan, is forgotten and lost. Other than the occasional visit by a wandering Capuchin, there would be no Christian clergy living in Nepal until the restoration of the monarchy when Father Moran established the current Jesuit mission.

Born in Chicago in 1906, Marshall D. Moran joined the Society of Jesus in 1924. With five other Jesuits sailed as a novice from New York to Bombay in 1929, then by train to their destination, the Patna Mission in Bihar. In India he studied and taught in Shembaganur, Bettiah, Kurseong and Ranchi, set up schools and hospitals, and worked in Patna University which had links with Tri Chandra College in Kathmandu – a connection that would change his life.

Father Bill Robins tells the story: “The Patna University sent an invigilator each year to supervise the Tri Chandra college exams. Professors hated to go. Marshall volunteered to fill in, and so in October 1949 travelled to the border and on to Amlekhganj in Nepal. A bus got him to Bhimphedi and from there he walked to Kathmandu. During the month in Nepal, Marsh was able to build relationships with those in power, while offering to help Nepal through school education. He returned to Patna, hoping that he would be invited back.”

On the feast of All Saints a year later, Marshall Moran received the keenly awaited summons from the new education minister, Nrip Jang Rana. Returning to Kathmandu in early 1951, Father Moran accepted the offer of Godavari Darbar, the Prime Minister's summer residence, as the school site, he recruited students and prepared the buildings. St. Xavier's in Godavari began classes on 1 July 1951, and land was purchased in Jawalakhel in 1954. Thanks to a plentiful supply of American missionaries and visa restrictions within India, a succession of Jesuit teachers were available to run the schools.

There were a couple of non-negotiable conditions attached to the invitation as prescribed by King Tribhuvan, and to which Father Moran concurred. The Jesuits' work was confined only to the Kathmandu Valley, and they were not permitted to proselytise. Within those limitations, which to this day the brotherhood are proud to have honoured to the letter, the Society of Jesus fathers have made their indelible mark on the history of Nepal. 🇳🇵



Fr Moran baptised Sangjay in Bansbari in 1987 (left). Both our sons were blessed and named by Fr Moran and Tenzin's family Rinpoche, covering both Buddhist and Christian rituals.



Zurich Airport International opts out of Nijgad

Still, government pushes a ghost airport so it can clear-cut valuable hardwood forest

Kashish Das Shrestha

The Nepal government's plan to force through a mammoth airport project, despite a global recession and concerns about an ecological disaster, has been pushed back after a Swiss company decided to pull out.

The government of Prime Minister K P Oli recently announced it was finalising an agreement with Zurich Airport International (ZAI) to develop the \$3.45 billion airport at Nijgad, 75km south of Kathmandu.

However, ZAI says it knows nothing about an agreement.

"In view of the current challenges inflicted on the aviation industry by Covid-19, Zurich Airport International is focusing its activities on our existing projects in India and Brazil," Raffaella Stelzer, a spokesperson for ZAI told *Nepali Times* last week. "We do not foresee any investments in projects outside these areas until the situation has significantly improved."

The Oli government had been pushing Nijgad as a 'national pride project' ever since it came to power in 2018, and it was aggressively backed by former Tourism Minister Rabindra Adhikari, and by his current successor Yogesh Bhattarai.

The government argues that Kathmandu airport is too congested, has limited room for expansion, and Nijgad would be a game changer for Nepal's economy. But it is not clear if the Nepal government is aware of the ZAI decision.

In May, Minister Bhattarai authorised felling of more than 4,000 trees for a link road to the project site located in the last remaining native hardwood forest in Nepal's eastern plains. The decision came in defiance of the standing Supreme Court order to not engage in any tree cutting for the airport project.

Last week, Bhattarai chaired a



DIWAKAR CHHETTRI

meeting which he told that nearly 60,000 trees had been counted and labeled for further felling. He instructed officials to complete the tree inventory by mid-November, and plan the relocation of settlements in the zone. Reports from the field say the land mafia is already moving in and encroaching on forests in anticipation of the project.

In last week's meeting, Bhattarai also directed the Investment Board Nepal (IBN) to communicate the plans to ZAI, and prepare to sign an agreement with the Nepal government.

However, even in May it was apparent that there had been no formal understanding between the Nepal government and ZAI, even though in Kathmandu the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism was using an agreement with ZAI as the basis for its decisions to go ahead with allocating a budget for tenders, and planning to cut trees.

This has reinforced speculation

that a purported deal with ZAI is just being used by the government to channel money for a project that it knows will not happen so the budget can be siphoned off — as has commonly happened in many other infrastructure projects. Critics have argued that Nijgad is

not really an airport project, but a logging concession.

ZAI's Stelzer told us in May: "Yes, in 2019 we expressed our general interest in this project to the government. Since then the ball has been in the court of the Nepali government. So, the project has never really started for us and we are not able to say more about it at the moment."

Yet, Minister Bhattarai and the government have spent the last four months pretending to media and the public that things were in order with their chosen Swiss partner. Now, ZAI has confirmed that it is no longer interested in building the airport.

The arguments against building Nijgad are both economic and environmental. When the grandiose project was first mooted in 1994, passenger jets had shorter range, and the hub-and-spoke model still made sense in aviation. Flights from Europe to East Asia and Australia had to make stopovers, and Nijgad could have been Nepal's Singapore or Dubai, boosting tourism.

However, with new Boeing 777X and 787-10s as well as Airbus 350s, planes can now fly point-to-point for 17 hours or more at a stretch, obviating the need for a refuelling stop. Also, awareness about climate change was already reducing air travel, and now the Covid-19 crisis

has forced global aviation to go belly-up. Experts agree it is the wrong time to be building mega airports.

Situated in the plains just south of the Chure Range and next to Parsa National Park, Nijgad is the last remaining patch of the famous Char Kose Jhari wilderness that spanned the Tarai. The forests have an important role in the hydrological ecosystem and food security downstream. Clear-cutting would jeopardise the region's rich biodiversity, and wildlife corridors for wild elephants and other animals.

A pro-forma government Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) that cleared the project was found to have copy-pasted entire paragraphs from a hydropower scheme in the mountains. The Nijgad EIA says the project site at 200m elevation is the habitat of two mammal species only found in the high mountains.

The government has said it will build Nijgad with its own money if foreign investors are not interested. But can Nepal, which has been hard-hit by the Covid-19 crisis, afford an expensive airport when job losses are driving Nepalis to hunger and suicide?

Yet, the government remains firmly committed to this white elephant project. The reason probably has something to do with profits that can be made in kickbacks for logging contracts. It must be too tempting to pass up — especially to build a political war-chest ahead of the 2022 elections.

The deal to clear-cut the valuable sal hardwood timber is said to be worth at least \$500,000,000, and if there is no airport, there will be no justification to clear the forest.

Illegal natural resource extraction is already the most lucrative business in Nepal, with contractors enjoying full political protection from many local ward chairs to the federal government in Kathmandu. Illegal sand-mining, quarrying, and the land mafia are well-established and have deep connections to politicians at the highest levels in Nepal.

In the 2017 elections, some of these contractors even got themselves elected as mayors, and became members of provincial and federal parliaments. Illegal and unsustainable sand and boulder mining of mountains and rivers have changed the entire landscape of parts of Nepal.

The government and backers of the project have called those opposing the project 'anti-development' and 'dollar-funded', and people who do not want to see Nepal prosper.

Bara district, where Nijgad is located, is also ground-zero for extreme weather events in recent years: heat waves, recurring floods, winter cold snaps that have killed hundreds, and even a freak tornado last year that flattened villages, killing 70.

With the climate crisis intensifying natural disasters, would any developer investing \$3.45 billion take such a site seriously for an airport that needs to be a busy international aviation hub?

The answer is no. But there is just too much money to be made, and Nepal's kleptocracy is pushing this ghost airport so it can make a quick killing. 🇳🇵

Kashish Das Shrestha is a National Geographic Explorer. He is a former adviser to Parliament's Natural Resources and Means Committee and Water and Energy Committee.



KIRAN NEPAL



PHOTOS: MONIKA DEUPALA

QFX cinema needs a happy ending

The pandemic has turned its thriving multiplex business into a horror movie

Alisha Sijapati

Today, the popular QFX multiplex at Labim Mall in Patan looks like a scene from a post-apocalyptic movie. The box office is deserted, the once-packed foyer is empty except for a security guard, the poster screens are covered up, the popcorn machine at the refreshment counter is covered in a sheet.

While the government eased the lockdown this month by resuming flights, travel, hotels, restaurants, and will soon allow trekking, QFX is waiting for approval for its

for bankruptcy. So I think we will be in trouble if we don't get back to business soon."

Nakim thought the lockdown would last a few months, but has had to revamp his entire business model. Most of the halls have three Audi screens with 180 seats for the audience, and he is considering reopening with just 60-70 seats.

Roshan Adiga, CEO of QFX Cinemas has been crunching the numbers to see if that is worthwhile. Through the Motion Pictures Association of Nepal, the



Few Safety Protocols for Reopening Cinemas

- Masks mandatory at all times
- Queues along floor markings
- Maintain 1m distance, no crowds
- Customers pay digitally with touchless transactions, or bring exact change
- Only couples, families allowed to sit together
- Theatres disinfected after each show

proposal for limited opening of cinemas before Dasain.

"Even if the government gives us a green signal, it is next to impossible for us to get back in our feet right away. It will take time for the audience to regain the confidence to go see a movie in a cinema hall," Nakim admits. "We have had zero revenue since March and in our country there is no law

company has submitted a proposal with protocols to the government for resumption of screenings.

The procedures would abide by WHO guidelines, with all seats, passages, refreshment area, foyer and toilets disinfected after every screening. Viewers would sit at least three seats apart, with entry and exits controlled so there is minimum intermingling.

Nakim himself is a movie buff, and admits that the cinematic experience will be different. However, he adds: "I am tired of binge-watching series and movies at home, nothing can beat the charm of a big silver screen in a theatre. It feels surreal thinking about it now."

Nakim and Adiga are optimistic about the future despite the Covid-19 crisis, and the challenge from movie streaming services. Both cinema owners and their cinema goers are waiting for a happy ending. 🍿

Turkish adds flights

Turkish Airlines, which had resumed weekly flight since Kathmandu airport opened for regular flights will increase its frequency to three per week between Kathmandu-Istanbul from October. The Nepal government has said it will open the country to foreigners who want to trek and climb in the Himalaya from 17 October, and being the only European airline serving Kathmandu, Turkish is expecting bookings to pick up. All incoming passengers are required to have RT PCR negative reports



done 72 hours prior to departure, and can go for two weeks home or hotel quarantine on arrival.

Said Turkish Airlines Nepal general manager Abdullah Tuncer Kecici: "Nepal is a tourism destination for us. Depending on the entry requirements for foreigners and Nepalis living abroad, we will be preparing to further increase the frequency in the coming months."

Yeti domestic tourism

After being grounded for six months, Yeti Airlines started limited flights this week, and has announced a domestic tourism package for Nepalis. Under the slogan: 'Flying for Sightseeing', the package will include roundtrip tickets, hotel stay, transport for domestic passengers. The carrier also launched its reservation app to coincide with its 22nd anniversary.



Ncell

Ncell has launched two data packs under its umbrella campaign 'Plus', which will enable 4G customers to choose between a one-day or 30 day pack for nonstop access to TikTok and Facebook. The one day pack is available to customers at Rs25 while the 30-day pack is available at Rs360. Customers who choose to activate the 30-day pack will get 6GB bonus data to browse the web.



Nabil Fone Loan

Nabil Bank has launched its Nabil Fone Loan digital lending service which will provide contactless, pre-approved collateral free micro-loans of up to Rs100,000 to customers through the bank's mobile banking platform as well as by use of a Virtual Credit Card.



Hyundai Dasain scheme

Hyundai has launched 'Espaliko Dasain Tihar, Welcome to Hyundai Pariwar' scheme for the festival season that offers customers cash discounts and an opportunity to win the new Hyundai Aura Hyundai Grand i10 NIOS with one year of free insurance. There is a package for frontline health workers.



New TATA Altroz

Tata Motors has digitally launched its premium hatchback Tata Altroz, the first car developed on the new ALFA architecture.



Powered by the 1.2L Revotron engine, the Altroz delivers 86PS of power and 113Nm of torque, while its multi drive modes: City and Eco, offer a balance between sporty driving dynamics and fuel efficiency.

Virtual Education Symposium

The British Council Nepal is hosting its 4th Virtual Education Symposium from 23-27 September on the theme School Leadership, principles and practices in Nepal and other countries. Policymakers, planners, administrators, teachers, researchers, the private sector and development partners will attend.

Sanima online credit card

Sanima Bank has launched its online credit card service for customers who can fill up an application form through the bank's website. Customers will be informed about the approval status of their credit card through email or phone.

Suzuki Festival offer

Suzuki has launched 'Chadparwa Sabko Hoosala Hamro', scheme on the occasion of the upcoming festival season, per which customers will get a discount of Rs12,000, cash worth one year of road tax, as well as exchange offers and better financing options on the purchase of Suzuki motorcycles and scooters

Chandragiri Hills

Chandragiri Hills has announced a 50% festival discount for rides on its cable car as well as a Rs6,500 breakfast and deluxe room package for a couple at Chandragiri Hills Resort. The offer is valid until 30 November.



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EVENTS

**Boudha Farmers Market**

Buy fresh and organic fruits and vegetables, fresh baked goods, and other goodies. Support local products and farmers, and follow physical distancing guidelines. *Every Saturday, 8-am-12pm, Utpala Cafe, Boudha, 9801978106*

International Illustration Competition

Japanese graphics software company Celsys has opened submissions for the International Illustration Contest 2020 under the theme 'The cutest character in the Galaxy'. Entrants can submit both traditional and digital illustrations using the contest hashtag on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Check the website for details. *Until 7 October*

ONLINE ARCHIVES

**Global Nepali Museum**

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

American Literature Library

The American Literature Library has a collection of 160 of the greatest classic short stories, and also thousands of classic novels free for readers to enjoy.

Photography workshop

photo.circle is taking applications from photographers for their upcoming two-week workshop 'Intro to Storytelling 2020' from 1-15 October. Participants will be introduced to a wide variety of visual styles and languages will be supported in producing a body of work in the duration of the workshop. Apply at forms.gle/zBZm9987DwGaqAVu7 . *Application deadline: 27 September*

**Nepal Bhasa classes**

Join Nepal Bhasa classes for beginners every Sunday and Thursday with instructor Rubin Shakya. The classes are part of the Mother Tongues language classes series from Quixote's Cove. Apply at <https://forms.gle/j6CqR5NgKMqM1Te2A> *27 September onwards, 7am-8am, Fee: Rs2,500/month*

Space Apps 2020

Participant registration for the NASA Space Apps 2020 is now open. Go to the space apps challenge website to search for a 'local virtual' event nearby. Participants will meet their local leads once they register, and will have access to the workshops and training that will be offered as part of the Virtual Bootcamp. Visit Nepal Astronomical Society (NASO) Facebook page for details. *2-4 October*

**Google Arts and Culture**

Google Arts & Culture has teamed up with over 2,500 museums and galleries around the world to bring everyone virtual tours and online exhibits of some of the world's most famous museums.

**The Story**

Narrated by Alec Baldwin, each episode of The Story is a mini-historical biography that presents unknown backstories of some of the most influential and successful figures in history. Find The Story on Stitcher and Apple podcast.

**One World Theatre**

Two of One World Theatre's plays are now on their YouTube channel. Watch the play *The Flight* and its adaptation of the Russian play *Three Sisters*.

**Cafe Soma**

Pick from Cafe Soma's burgers and sandwiches served with potato wedges and coleslaw. Or get the Beetroot & Walnut salad as a healthier option. Browse the menu. *Jawalakhel (01) 5528732/ Baluwatar (01) 4415792*

**Blenders Milkshake**

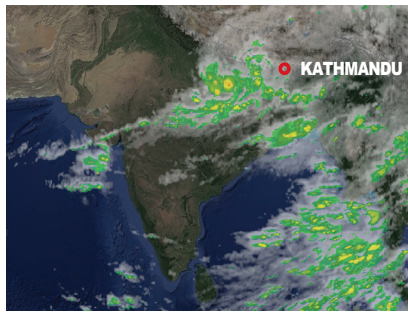
As the days get shorter and evenings cooler, beat back the last few summer afternoons with delicious fresh cold milkshakes out of reusable bottles. Find flavours to suit on Bhojdeals and Foodmandu, or call to order. *9860675655*

**Himali Farmer's Kitchen**

Enjoy the best of classic Nepali dishes like *bhatmas sadeko*, *Mustang aloo*, and *Thakali Khana* sets from Himali Farmer's Kitchen. Delivery options are also available. *11am-10pm, Chaksibari Marg, 9808153055*

**Everfresh**

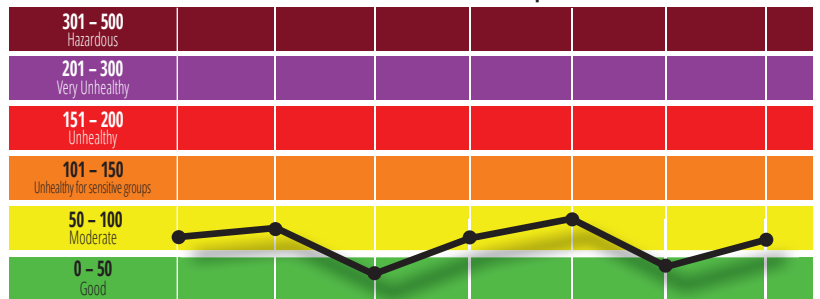
Perfect for brunch and breakfast lovers, Everfresh offers the best elevated avocado toast, fluffy pancakes, brioche french toast and buckwheat crepes. *Lazimpat, 9803700736*



This is pretty late in the season to have a monsoon pulse, but it is not unusual. The low pressure system from the Bay of Bengal was stopped on its tracks by a nascent westerly, and dumped all its rain over Nepal this week, the lower temperature intensifying condensation. There will more rain on Friday in Kathmandu as the monsoon retreats, and by the weekend the sun will be playing peek-a-boo again through afternoon cloud buildup.

**AIR QUALITY INDEX**

KATHMANDU, 18 - 24 Sept



PM2.5

FRIDAY September 18 SATURDAY September 19 SUNDAY September 20 MONDAY September 21 TUESDAY September 22 WEDNESDAY September 23 THURSDAY September 24

The graph above shows a perfect correlation between rains and air pollution. On days when there have been showers, the daily average Air Quality Index (AQI) tends to be lower. A late monsoon pulse this week prevented Kathmandu's air quality from getting worse, despite traffic volume picking up. AQI went on a roller coaster between the Green and Yellow Zones. Keep track of hour-by-hour AQI in Kathmandu at [nepalitimes.com](https://np.usembassy.gov/embassy/air-quality-monitor/)

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

ECOLOGIC WITH MISS MOTI

KRIPA JOSHI

**CLEAN UP YOUR LITTER**

Littering is an ever-increasing worldwide problem. Not only is it unsightly to look at, it has serious health and environmental consequences as well. Litter can carry germs and attracts pests and rodents that can spread many types of diseases. The environment becomes threatened when litter invades natural habitats and when toxic chemicals from them seep into soil and groundwater.

Litter on sidewalks or along the curbs eventually get washed down to our rivers. Animals may mistake litter as food and could choke on them or get entangled in it.

Education is an important tool to combat littering. Clean communities have a better chance of attracting new business, residents and tourists. We can set an example for others, especially children, by not littering and by carrying a litter bag with us. When visiting parks and recreation areas, we need to make sure we leave the area clean for others to also enjoy after us. #FridaysForFuture

OUR PICK

2020 American docudrama directed by Jeff Orlowski *The Social Dilemma* explores the dangerous impact of social media on humans and society, with tech experts from Google, Facebook and Pinterest among others sounding the alarm on their own creations. The film focuses particularly on surveillance capitalism and data mining, networking site designs meant to nurture an addiction and their use on politics and in fueling conspiracy theories. Skyler Gisondo, Kara Hayward and Vincent Kartheiser star.

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

“We better take this virus seriously”

Airline captain Vijay Lama recounts his struggle against Covid-19, has advice for the rest of us

I am a Captain with Nepal Airlines, and had been feeling unusually fatigued in the cockpit during recent trips. After a repatriation flight from Riyadh two weeks ago, I was assigned to fly out Nepal Army peacekeeping troops stationed in South Sudan.



COMMENT
Vijay Lama

I was in the cockpit for only half the 24 hour roundtrip to Juba, but on return to Kathmandu my skin started feeling like it was being poked with needles. I had a headache, and soon developed a fever.

I gradually lost my sense of taste and smell of food, and used to break out into sweat. I quarantined myself at Soaltee Hotel and got a PCR test. Since it came back positive, and being symptomatic, I was admitted into Star Hospital.

My condition got worse. The fever stayed at 102, and I had severe head and joint aches. I tossed and turned in bed, and could not sleep, sometimes I was delirious. Nurses and physicians in masks, visors and PPE would ask me muffled questions, but I could not see their faces, and in my blurred vision, they looked like automatons.

I am certain that I am alive now, and can speak these words, because of these dedicated healthcare workers. As airline crew during the pandemic, we considered ourselves frontline professionals as we carried out ferry flights to rescue stranded NepalIs abroad. But it is the medical personnel at our



VIJAY LAMA

hospitals who are the true frontline heroes doing battle to save lives at great personal risk.

They work 12 hour shifts at a stretch in full PPEs, they cannot even take a toilet break. They cannot go home to families, and if they live in rented flats, they face stigmatisation from landlords and neighbours. Many are underpaid and over-worked, do not have insurance, some even had their salaries cut as hospitals struggle to survive. I salute their dedication.

After coming out of the dark

corridor of this disease, I beseech everyone to take this virus seriously. I only survived because I got the very best care available in Nepal, I had access to the medicines, was in a strong physical and mental state, and I could afford the cost of treatment.

Many of us may not be as lucky, which means we have to take even more care – especially if we have underlying conditions, are senior citizens, or have elderly relatives at home. And we have to take extra precautions as we go into the

winter flu season, and lockdown restrictions are relaxed further. For example, we have to strictly enforce the PCR negative rule for airline passengers.

Just because you are young, bored at home, or miss your friends, please do not let your guard down. If you get sick, you will not just be jeopardising your own health. You never know where you can pick up this airborne virus. Always wear masks when outside the home, avoid crowded places, maintain a safe distance, and wash hands.

Even when a vaccine is available next year, it is not a 100% guarantee, and you will need to maintain these precautions.

The most distressing thing about Covid-19 is that you are all alone in your hospital. You cannot see your family, the health care workers do not have faces, and it can really bring your spirit down. So, you have to maintain a positive mental attitude, convince yourself that you will beat this virus.

You have to keep your brain very active, not worry too much, and make plans for the future. You cannot let the virus win, and keeping yourself mentally alert is as important as maintaining physical strength. After all, it is the mind that enhances your immune system.

Even with all my crew training, will power and good physical state, I do not think I would have survived without the hospital treatment I got. Remdesivir boosted my body's capacity to fight back, as did some of the other drugs.

But my advice is not to rely on turmeric, or some of the other traditional remedies, they are not a cure. I am now waiting for my final PCR test, and if it is negative I hope to go home, and after regaining my strength will be back in the cockpit soon.

The SARS-CoV-2 is a formidable enemy. Do not take it lightly. Do not think you are invincible. It is not a flu. It is a killer, and it will take you down to its dark depths, and you have to fight your way back up to the light. 🇳🇵

Vijay Lama is a senior Airbus330 captain with Nepal Airlines, and dictated this comment from his hospital bed on Wednesday morning.

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The NRNA provided room in Bur Dubai for Krishna Bahadur Gandharva and other Nepali workers.

Workers stuck in no-man's land

Migrants in the Gulf are caught between cruel employers and a heartless homeland

More than 43,000 overseas migrant workers have returned to Nepal during the Coronavirus pandemic out of 125,000 who registered to be 'rescued,' according to Nepal's Labour Ministry. The pace of the repatriation exercise has been painfully slow, and many workers who have lost their jobs or cannot bear to be so far away, are desperately trying to return home.

Many stranded workers have spent any savings that they had, and are barely surviving with support from friends, co-workers or other Nepalis, including from the Non-resident Nepali Association (NRNA). Others still do not know how they will manage to buy a ticket if they ever get on a flight list. Here are some of their stories as part of the Nepal Photo Project.

KUWAIT

Etubar Kisku went to Kuwait in 2017, encouraged by a friend from his village who was already



Etubar Kisku

working there. "I actually got lured into it — he painted such a rosy picture. I got excited about the idea of working at a hotel in a foreign land with a good salary. He told me that I would get 100 dinars (Rs39,000) per month. I have two daughters and a wife to look after, so I agreed."

"When I came here things were different, I wanted to return home," says Kisku, 36, from Bhagudubba of Jhapa district. His job was not at a hotel as promised, but in a restaurant. He was paid about Rs36,000 and was sending home Rs20,000 from it every month. But the restaurant closed, and Kisku has been without work for four months. "Thankfully the company has provided accommodation and we don't have to pay rent," he says.

When the pandemic started, Kisku and some of his Nepali flatmates stocked their pantry with essential items like rice, oil, salt and potatoes. He has been able to find some construction work

through Indian and Bangladeshi migrant worker friends, but it is back-breaking. "The work is not regular, and for 12 hours I only make about Rs2,000," Kisku says. "Still, it is better than having no work — it at least helps me to survive."

He has been waiting to return home for many months, but the flight costs more than he can afford. "The ticket home is Rs85,000 one way, I don't have that kind of money," he says adding, "At this rate, I wonder if I will be able to go home."

Kisku's company still has his passport despite efforts to get it back. "I keep calling them, but they always say one thing or the other and hang up."

Kisku has built a community of Nepalis who he calls his 'solti' and 'soltini'. Every morning after waking up he calls his soltini who works at the airport to check ticket prices. "I am not educated, I do not know the ways of the world, so I ask them, and I trust that they will help me in my time of need," he says.

Bunu Dhungana

SAUDI ARABIA

Raju Murmu — When we talked to Raju Murmu in late August, he was crammed into a room in Saudi Arabia's capital Jeddah with 14 other Nepalis. They had pooled their money and bought an internet package to ensure that they could tell their story to the world, but the data pack was running out, and they could not afford to buy another one.

Of the workers Murmu, 31, from Jhapa was the only one who knew how to use the internet. "Where are the concerned authorities? We want them to see the condition we are living in now, we want them to



Raju Murmu

rescue us," said Murmu then, via video call.

Murmu had been stuck in Jeddah since December. After he lost his job as a cleaner at the airport, he tried to find another one in the city, but he was not allowed to work. When the Nepal Government announced that international commercial flights would resume in August, he asked his family in Nepal to send him Rs50,000 and paid Rs84,000 for a ticket home. He also paid Rs7000 for a PCR test.

Finally on 6 September, Murmu landed in Kathmandu and quarantined in a hotel in Bag Bazar, where last Thursday he did a PCR test. He tested negative and has been with his family in Jorpati since then.

Murmu made the journey home with a heavy heart: "How can I be happy when the people I spent four years with are stuck, and have no hope of coming back? I can only be at peace when I know all my

friends in Jeddah are home safe."
Nitu Ghale

Narendra Sarwariya, Mahendra Hemran, Narendra Prasad Chaudhary, Ramnepal Thakur

Among those who shared a room with Raju Murmu are Narendra Sarwariya, 30, and Mahendra Hemran, 26, from Mahottari and Morang districts. They worked as cleaners in Jeddah but have been unemployed for the last six months.

The men have been sharing the single room with up to 14 other Nepalis. They first pooled their money and bought an internet data pack to ensure that they could share their plight. The internet ran out, and now they are selling gifts they had bought for their families — blankets, chocolates, watches, etc — to pay for the internet.

While two among them have managed to make it back to Nepal, the others whose families do not have money to send for tickets have remained behind. They are running out of food and water and have been ordered to vacate their single room. Weeks after we originally talked to Hemran, last week he left this voice message on our mobile phone: "Please help me get back home. I want to come home, I love my country. If I could come home everything would be good."

Also sharing the room are Narendra Prasad Chaudhary, 48, from Nawalparasi and Ramnepal Thakur, 53, from Dhanusha. They cannot go home because the company they worked for refuses to return their passport.

Chaudhary says he was asked to pay Rs187,000 and Thakur Rs125,000 to get their passports back. "How can we pay such a huge amount?" asks Chaudhary. "We have been unemployed for the past six months."

He continues: "Having worked



Narendra Sarwariya



Mahendra Hemran



Narendra Prasad Chaudhary



Ramnepak Thakur



for 12 years, I should have received a bonus. Instead, I have to give them money. And have to pay an additional amount to go home. Why do we have to pay to go home in times like these?"

Nitu Ghale

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Raj (who asked us to hide his real name) from Bhaktapur resigned from his job in Abu Dhabi in February because he was planning to go to Croatia. However, his company did not process his resignation on time, so he got stranded in Abu Dhabi without work.

After applying twice, he got his name on the Embassy of Nepal list for a chartered flight, behind 7,000 others. In June, he trusted a friend of a friend with 1,500 dirham (Rs48,000) to book his ticket. But

the agent failed to get a ticket and did not return the money.

Running out of cash, Raj, 43, started doing odd jobs like painting and moving goods to cover his basic expenses. With the help of the NRNA he got hold of the agent, who provided a small space in a room that he shared with two others, sleeping on the floor. Then the owner of the room asked him to move out or pay rent.

While he struggles to return to Nepal, at home his family is also squeezed. Raj has a son, 13, who was studying in a private school. Without any earnings the boy will have to leave that school and move to a government one.

Raj has now found a new place to stay (*pictured above*) and has a flight ticket for 22 September, which he bought for

Rs79,000 after collecting small amounts from many people. As of 9 September he has about Rs6,500 left, from which Rs4,800 is for a mandatory PCR test before boarding the flight.

"I'm a very strong-willed person. I have faced difficulties in these past couple of months, but I have never given up. I was ready to go live on the streets if I had to. I took up odd jobs just so I could eat. I would not have survived if I was weak inside," he says.

"I have not shared the hardships with my family back in Nepal. Both my parents are old and I do not want them to be stressed because of something they cannot control. I do not think my situation will change if I share it with my 80-year-old dad — what is the point?"

Tripty Tamang Pakhrin

Kumar Shrestha

After more than five years working as a security guard in Dubai, Kumar Shrestha had hoped to clear his loans and save a little with this year's earnings. Little did he know that he would be stuck in a camp in Al Quoz without a job from March onwards.

Things were going according to plan until January, when his company cut his salary after business declined. In March they told him to stay home until they called. Every day his roommates would leave for work while he waited for the phone to ring. "I was unemployed for six months. I was getting 300 dirham (Rs9,600) per month for food. It is not enough for an expensive city like Dubai but I do not have any other choice," says Shrestha, 32, from Dhading.

Frustrated with the waiting, Shrestha is resigned to his fate. "I do not want to come back now. I was planning to stay for another year, pay off my bank loan, save some money and go back to my own country. The plan has been shattered by this pandemic."

Now living with five others in a labour camp, he applied for a chartered flight from the Nepal Government but has not heard from the embassy. He planned to use his savings of Rs51,000 to buy a ticket home, but prices have risen to Rs84,000 so he cannot afford one.

He dejectedly describes his life in the camp: "I have not been in a real jail but this does feel like one ... there is nothing to do and I cannot go anywhere. I am just waiting for the ticket prices to go down."

Tripty Tamang Pakhrin

Dipesh Bhattarai

In July, when Dipesh Bhattarai read that Nepal would resume international flights by mid-August he was thrilled. The



Dipesh Bhattarai

21-year-old has been stuck in Dubai for the last four months on an expired visa without a job, and no way to support himself. Then, his excitement turned to disappointment when the Nepal Government reversed the decision and announced that international commercial flights would remain suspended until 31 August.

Bhattarai left Bardia two years ago to support his family. In Dubai, he worked as a supply assistant. He calls the Nepal Embassy in Abu Dhabi every day but has not been able to get through to someone with information. "The embassy doesn't answer when people like us call," he says.

Bhattarai has no food, is running out of money and his passport is with his former employers.

"They took our passports the day we entered Dubai because they think we will run away," he says, "this is not my country, and my country does not want me — I feel like I do not belong anywhere."

Nitu Ghale

Krishna Bahadur Gandharva

Krishna Bahadur Gandharva, 30, from Sandhikharka of Arghakhanchi district was one of the 17 Nepalis who reached Dubai to work with Flex Facility Management in January 2020. The



following month they were all left stranded, jobless. Then their visas were cancelled with the company citing Covid-19 related reasons.

The group did not have money to return to Nepal. Additionally, they had borrowed from friends and banks to pay Rs140,000 each to the recruitment agency in Nepal to get their jobs. For five months, Gandharva and his friends were stuck in the Jebel Ali camp. "It was torturous. We did not have money for food, there was no running water, there was no AC and it was 55 degrees," he says. "The NRNA gave us food once in a while, but it would only last a few days. Some days we begged for food, some days we slept without it."

Their lives were made harder by supervisors and camp personnel who mentally and physically harassed them to try to force them to leave. Finally their employer and the Nepal Embassy reached an agreement and booked their tickets for free for 10 August. "We were so delighted to return to Nepal. I forgot all the hardships we endured during those five months the moment I heard the news," says Gandharva.

When they reached the airport, the UAE authorities said they would charge them for overstaying their visas. "We were asked to pay 1,287 dirham (Rs41,000) each. It was a shock," says Gandharva, adding, "we tried calling our employer but they told us to never contact them again. We had no money so we were sent back from the airport."

The NRNA stepped in and provided them with a room in Bur Dubai, where they have been living ever since. "It's been a month now and the NRNA has asked us to find a way to go back — the fine for living in Dubai without a visa is 25 Dirham (Rs800) per day," says Gandharva. "Please rescue us and take us home."

Tripty Tamang Pakhrin

Stories produced in collaboration with @NepalPhotoProject and the Photo Circle 2020 grant.



Workers' camp in Dubai



Kumar Shrestha in Dubai

Covid-19 lessons for Kathmandu from the Tarai

Sonia Awale

In July, as the government eased the first lockdown, people streamed across the border from India into Nepal, spreading the coronavirus infection along cities in the Tarai.

The districts from Jhapa to Parsa became hotspots. Hospitals ran out of ICU beds and ventilators, municipalities had no test kits left, and there were horror stories of patients dying while going from one hospital to another that refused admission.

But it did not take too long for asymptomatic carriers to bring the virus into Kathmandu Valley, where population density and high mobility made the capital an ideal breeding ground for SARS-CoV-2.

With 16 additional deaths on Monday, total Covid-19 fatality in Nepal has now reached 427. Kathmandu Valley alone accounts for over one-fourth of all deaths in Nepal from the virus. On Monday, Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur districts recorded 674 new cases (more than half the nationwide total of 1,154).

The tables are now turned. Even as the Tarai has the virus largely under control, the majority of the 196 patients in ICU and 31 on ventilator support nationwide are in Kathmandu Valley. The country's only infectious diseases hospital in Teku, despite adding isolation wards, ventilators and ICU beds, has run out of space for Covid-19 patients.

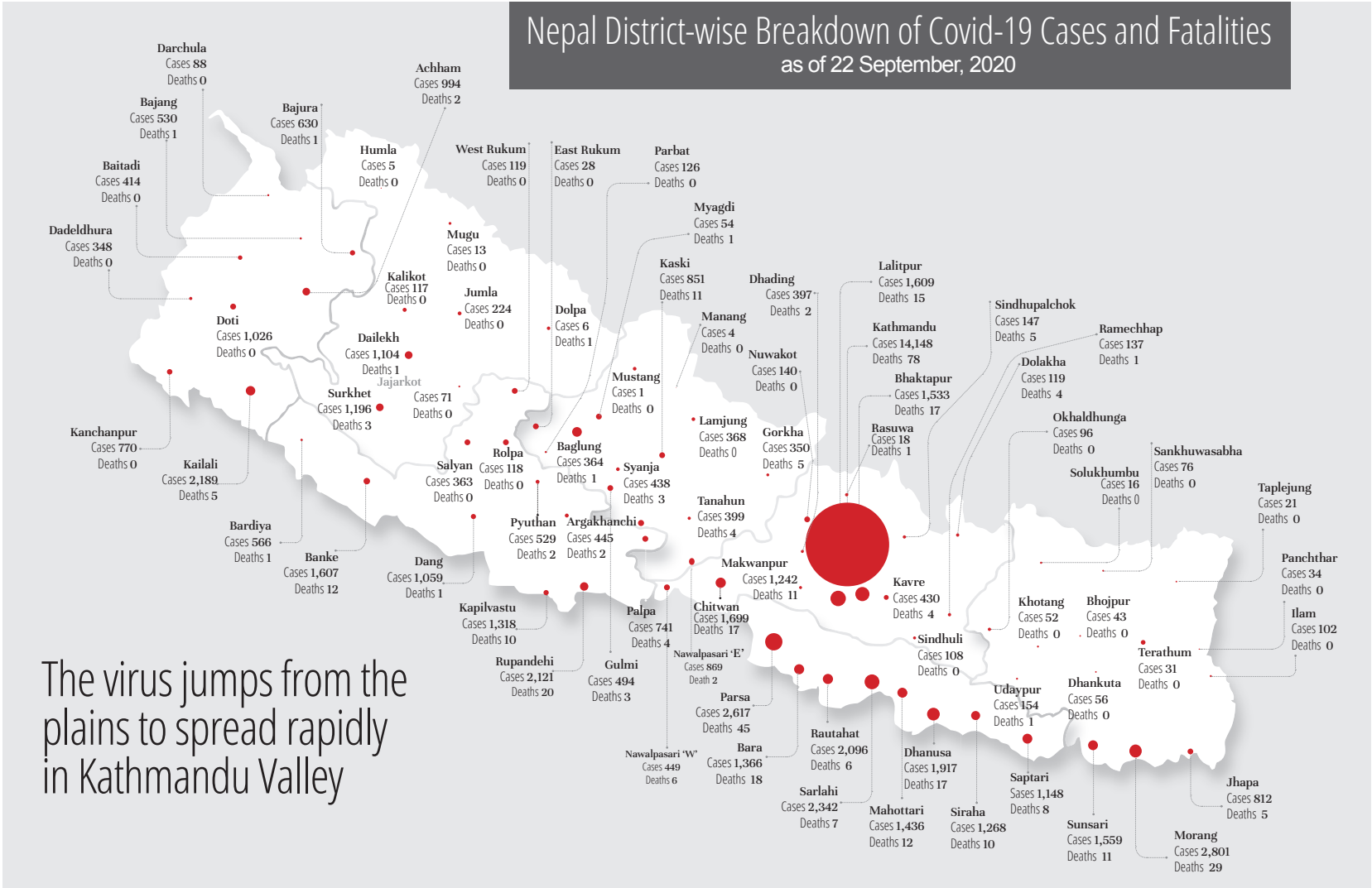
"Even with the increased capacity, we cannot admit all the patients," hospital director Sagar Rajbhandari told *Nepali Times*.

Three months after the government announced it would build a 300-bed hospital just for coronavirus patients, there has been no action. It has not followed the advice of its own public health experts to expand testing and tracing.

In fact, the Nepal government seems to have admitted defeat. Its unspoken strategy now is now letting the virus take its course, warning citizens to adopt their own precautions and learn to live with the disease until a vaccine is available.

This explains why even as the number of new cases and fatalities in Kathmandu Valley break its own record every day, the lockdown is being further eased with public transport, flights, shops and restaurants allowed to open.

Adding to this is the utter lack of coordination between locally



The virus jumps from the plains to spread rapidly in Kathmandu Valley

elected municipality officials and the District Administration Offices which issue new and contradictory guidelines every day, and blame each other for the situation getting worse.

"Kathmandu's response to the pandemic shows that the central government doesn't trust local units who are close to the people and can respond fastest to their needs," says Chandra Kishore, a Tarai-based journalist in Birganj. "The focus should be on empowering local governments and health posts to contain the spread of the virus."

Even as Kathmandu struggles to contain the virus with all the resources and facilities at its disposal, Nepal's capital could learn a few things from the way Tarai cities and municipalities handled the spike and brought the virus under control.

One example is Narainapur in Banke district, which first made it to the news as a hotspot back in May with over 100 cases and Nepal's second Covid-19 fatality.

Most of the infected were migrant worker returnees from India. Since then, the municipality has brought active cases down to zero.

"In our experience what worked the best was the collaboration between the local government, CDO office and the Nepal Army," says Naresh Shrestha, the Covid-19 focal point for Banke district. "This has helped us conduct proactive contact tracing and raise awareness about safety measures. Narainapur is also relatively isolated which helped us seal the access points and better manage the outbreak."

After Kathmandu Valley, Banke has conducted the most PCR tests and of the total 1,662 coronavirus cases in the district, 1,264 people have already recovered. The remaining cases are in densely populated areas of Nepalganj and Kohalpur.

Nepalganj mayor Dhawal Shumshere Rana says his city was among the first to be hit with the coronavirus, and had to learn quickly through trial and error.

"We now have the virus more or less under control. We still have some cases, but life is back to normal and our people are following safety measures," he says.

In the neighbouring district of Bardia which has a 83km border with India, there has been a gradual

rise in cases. In Badhaiyatal municipality, the authorities shut the quarantine centre that had become an incubator for the virus.

"After we realised what was happening, we focused on containing the virus in the quarantine centre and invested in contact tracing, which helped us bring the situation under control," explained Gokarna Giri of the Bardia District Health Office.

Udaypur in the Inner Tarai of eastern Nepal was a coronavirus hot spot in April when 13 men in a mosque who had returned from Delhi all tested positive. There was stringent contact tracing of people who they had been in close proximity to, and the district was sealed off for months.

In fact, Udaypur's experience is now called the 'Bhulke Model' after a ward of Triyuga Municipality that used PCR tests for contact tracing after false negatives from RDTs. Infected people were immediately sent to hospital isolation wards, and health officials did repeat contact tracing of the entire community until cases came down to zero.

Gaighat-based activist Najbul Khan used to travel every day

on her motorbike with supplies and medicines for communities ostracised due to infection.

"The community, volunteers, and the local authorities all worked together to overcome the virus. It is because of this that Udaypur is a model for successfully bringing Covid-19 under control," Khan says.

In the beginning, Udaypur did not even have sufficient personnel to collect swab samples, and the district hospital's Parmendra Yadav was working overtime to conduct tests without proper personal protective gear. His hard work was met with stigma: fearful colleagues stopped talking, and the eatery he frequented stopped serving him.

But Yadav persisted, he trained lab personnel to bring the district's limited health services up to speed and received PPE from non-profits in the area.

"It was a difficult two months, but it paid off knowing how far we have come in terms of controlling Covid-19," says Yadav. "Kathmandu could learn from our strategy of widespread testing, contact tracing, and strict border controls."

With reporting from Ramu Sapkota.

