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WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

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28.4°C 0.5°C
Simara Jomsom

In one Nawalpur village, women are using remittance to start businesses and prevent their husbands from migrating again

When remittance is plied into the productive sector, it can end the cycle of migration and provide a safety net for migrant families.

TEXT & PHOTOS: TSERING NGODUP LAMA
NAWALPUR

Almost a year ago, when Phumisara Thapa decided to start cucumber farming, everybody was sceptical. Some even tried to dissuade her, saying farming would cost a lot of money and she didn't have the experience to run a commercial farm. But farming wasn't new to Thapa; it was the only other thing she did, besides her household chores.

Thapa got married at the age of 16. As a housewife, her day began early at 4am, first cleaning and cooking, before working on the family's small plot of land. Occasionally, she made homemade liquor, which she sold in the nearby market. But this meant that she had no time or savings of her own.

"I only had Rs5,000 and I needed Rs20,000 to start farming," said 29-year-old Thapa. "So I decided to ask my husband to invest."

But Thapa's husband, who was working in Malaysia at that time, refused.

"He said that he would send me more money if what he was sending for household expenses wasn't enough," said Thapa. "But I remained firm on my decision, and my husband, very reluctantly, decided to invest money. As it was my first business, I was terribly nervous. I kept worrying what I would do if I lost that money."

But by the end of the three-month cucumber season, Thapa had made a profit of Rs50,000. The money that she and her husband



In the village of Jugepani in Hupsekot Rural Municipality, Nawalpur district, the majority of men work abroad. Only the women, children and elderly are left behind.

had invested had paid off, and Thapa was in charge of a vibrant new business. That was in April 2019. Today, she's used the profits to invest in two other ventures—a tailoring shop and a pig farm. She makes around Rs25,000 every month.

In the village of Jugepani in Hupsekot Rural Municipality, Nawalpur district, the majority of men work in Malaysia and the Gulf. According to locals, every household has at least one member working abroad. Only the women, children and elderly are left behind.

Remittance money is the single largest contributor to Nepal's GDP. In 2018, Nepalis working abroad sent home \$8.1 billion, contributing 28 percent of the country's GDP. Numerous studies and reports have pointed out the pitfalls of remittance, primarily the fact that it is creating an unhealthy dependence and that the money sent back is not being used productively. Most reports show that remittance is used for consumption, with some even suggesting that remittance is leading Nepalis to work less.

But in Jugepani, women like Thapa are not sitting around, waiting for their husbands to send home money. What is happening here contradicts established opinion. The women from Jugepani have been using the remittance money sent by their husbands to start businesses, helping create a thriving local economy. Some of the women have even become successful enough to convince husbands to return home.

>> Continued on page 8



DESTINATIONS | 16

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New Indian envoy faces growing geopolitical rivalry, border dispute in Nepal

As the interests of India, China and the US clash in Kathmandu, Vinay Kwatra will need to engage India's soft power to showcase neighbourhood first policy.

ANIL GIRI
KATHMANDU, MARCH 6

As soon Vinay Mohan Kwatra, the new Indian ambassador to Nepal, presented his credentials to President Bidya Devi Bhandari on Thursday, he embarked on a marathon meeting session, hobnobbing with half a dozen political leaders in 24 hours.

Kwatra's actions quickly drew reactions on social media, with some commending his high ener-



Kwatra

PHOTO: INDIAN EMBASSY/TWITTER

gy and others comparing him to Rakesh Sood, a former Indian ambassador who was known for his active diplomatic activities in Kathmandu.

Kwatra's calls involved Vice President Nanda Bahadur Pun, Chairman of the National Assembly Ganesh Timilsina, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Ishwar Pokhrel, former prime minister and Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba, Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali, senior Nepal Communist Party leader Madhav Kumar Nepal, and Energy Minister Barsha Man Pun.

>> Continued on page 3

As Covid-19 spreads to Malaysia and the Gulf, uncertainty looms over Nepali migrants' jobs

Labour migration to South Korea has been halted but no decision has been taken yet on migrant departures to the popular labour destinations as coronavirus cases multiply.



Travellers are shown on screens at Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu.

CHANDAN KUMAR MANDAL
KATHMANDU, MARCH 6

In late February, in response to the massive spread of Covid-19 in South Korea, the government temporarily suspended labour migration to the country. Now, as Covid-19 cases begin

to spike in countries in the Gulf and Malaysia, which are primary destinations for Nepali migrants, there are concerns that the government will suspend travel to these countries too.

South Korea has been most affected, after China, by Covid-19 with over 6,280 confirmed cases and 40 deaths.

Among major destinations for Nepalis in the Middle East, Kuwait has reported 58 confirmed cases, Bahrain has 49, the United Arab Emirates has 27, Qatar has 8 and Saudi Arabia has 2, so far. Malaysia too has reported 50 confirmed cases.

There are an estimated 500,000 Nepali migrants in Malaysia, the most popular labour destination, followed by Qatar with over 400,000, Saudi Arabia (334,451) and the United Arab of Emirates (224,905), according to the 2019 Migration in Nepal Report.

Even as more Nepalis ready themselves to go abroad, despite the global health panic, the government remains undecided on whether to halt labour migration to these countries.

"The ministry has been discussing various options, including whether to stop labour permits and what to do in case of a mass outbreak, in the last couple of days but no formal decision has been taken so far," said Suman Ghimire, spokesperson for the Labour Ministry.

>> Continued on page 4



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Supreme Court questions government on constituency development programme

Three Nepali Congress lawmakers had filed a writ petition demanding an end to ‘discrimination’ between directly elected and proportional representation lawmakers.



The five-member constitutional bench of the Supreme Court issued the order on Friday.

TIKA R PRADHAN
KATHMANDU, MARCH 6

The Supreme Court has issued a show-cause to the government over regulations that govern the constituency development programme. The five-member constitutional bench of the Supreme Court, which includes Chief Justice Cholendra Shumsher Rana, issued the order on Friday after three lawmakers moved the court saying that members of the House of Representatives who win their seats under the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system get to select projects under the constituency

development fund, but those who make to Parliament under the proportional (PR) system don’t have a say in it. The government provides Rs 60 million to each member of the House of Representatives elected under the FPTP system for the development of their constituencies. “The Supreme Court has issued a show-cause notice to the government,” said lawmaker Prakash Rasaili (Snehi), one of the petitioners who filed the writ on December 17. “Now authorities need to present a written response through the Attorney General’s office within 15 days.”

In their petition, Rasaili (Snehi), a lawmaker elected to the House of Representatives under the the PR system from Bajhang and Rangamati Shahi, elected under the PR system from Humla, and Prakash Pantha, a member of the National Assembly, demanded that the court issue an interim order to halt the programme until the case is finalised. The lawmakers say that the member of Parliament elected under the FPTP system convenes the committee that decides how to use the fund, without consulting other lawmakers. This is against the spirit of the constitution which does not discriminate between lawmakers elected under different systems in the federal Parliament. The three lawmakers filed the petition after Bhairav Bahadur Singh of Nepal Communist Party, elected on the FPTP system from Bajhang-1, used the fund without consulting members of Parliament elected under the PR system. In his budget speech, Finance Minister Yubaraj Khatiwada had said that working procedures governing for the programme will be revised to ensure that all lawmakers are involved in monitoring of the projects under the programme. However, the provisions were not rolled out.



Schoolchildren play with colours at Maruhiti in the Capital on Friday. Holi, the festival of colours, is celebrated in Kathmandu on Monday.

As Covid-19 spreads to Malaysia ...

>> Continued from page 1

“As the Supreme Court has directed the government to stay alert, we need to have some early preparedness measures in place.” The government, on Monday, issued a travel advisory asking the public to refrain from non-essential travel to countries affected by Covid-19, including China, South Korea, Iran, Japan and Italy, to prevent the spread of the disease to Nepal and Nepalis. Nepali missions in labour destinations have also issued similar advisories asking Nepali citizens to stay safe and suggesting measures to protect themselves from a potential infection. But on Tuesday, there was mass confusion among migrants as numerous media reports claimed that labour permits for some countries had been temporarily stopped in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak. The Labour Ministry later clarified that no such decision had been taken. “The Labour Ministry is coordinating with other government agencies to discuss the matter in detail before coming out with any such decisions,”

said Ghimire. “Coronavirus cases are on the rise. We need to analyse the situation thoroughly and coordinate.” Although a decision has yet to be taken, the coronavirus outbreak is certain to affect the country’s labour migration sector. Numerous countries have placed travel restrictions and in countries severely affected severely by Covid-19, like South Korea and Japan, shops and businesses have shut down, turning cities into ghost towns. The Nepali migrant population is certainly reeling from the downturn in the economies of these cities. Source countries like Nepal, whose labour force remains highly concentrated in a few Persian Gulf countries and East Asia, should be cautious while sending their workers to countries with reported cases of coronavirus, said Jeevan Baniya, a labour migration researcher. “Sending out workers to those countries can have severe implications,” said Baniya, who is also an assistant director at the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility at Social Science Baha, a think tank. “There should be prior risk analysis as there could be

political consequences if a Nepali worker spreads the virus in foreign lands. A large scale outbreak will also necessitate the rescue and repatriation of our citizens, and their subsequent treatment here in Nepal.” The coronavirus outbreak has once again exposed the problems with Nepali labour migration and its dependence on a few destination countries for jobs. Labour analysts have often warned that any turmoil in the Middle East could have significant consequences for the migrants there, and on the Nepali economy, to which remittance is a major contributor. “Our dependence on a handful of countries, when there are geopolitical and economic upheavals, can have serious ramifications on our labour migration sector,” said Baniya. “The global economy has been affected, so has the economy of those countries, meaning the labour demand from Nepal might see a drop in the future as well.” The World Health Organization has so far confirmed more than 97,000 Covid-19 infections in dozens of countries, with more than 3,380 deaths.

माइग्रेसन हराएको सूचना मिति २०७६/११/१ गते गौतमगर्देखि भरतपुरसम्म जाँदा मेरो निम्नलिखित व्यहोरा भएको माइग्रेसन हराएको हुँदा फेला पार्नुहुने महानुभावहरूले नजिकैको प्रहरी चौकी वा तल उल्लेखित नम्बरमा सम्पर्क गर्न अनुरोध गर्दछु। नाम : सुनैना के.सी. Migration Symbol No.: 23506752 Registration No.: 733558750 फोन नम्बर :	पासपोर्ट हराएको सूचना मिति २०७६/११/८ गते भरतपुरबाट टाँडीसम्म जाँदा मेरो निम्नलिखित व्यहोरा भएको पासपोर्ट हराएको हुँदा फेला पार्नुहुने महानुभावहरूले नजिकैको प्रहरी चौकी वा तल उल्लेखित नम्बरमा सम्पर्क गर्न अनुरोध गर्दछु। नाम : प्रतीक रिजाल ठेगाना : रत्ननगर-९, चितवन Passport No.: 09413470 फोन नम्बर : ९८४५१९९३९१	राहदानी हराएको सूचना २०७६।१०।२५ गतेका दिन पदमपुर बाट भरतपुर जाने क्रममा मेरो निम्न व्यहोरा भएको राहदानी (पासपोर्ट) हराएको हुँदा पाउनुहुने महानुभावले नजिकको प्रहरी चौकी वा मेरो मोबाइलमा सम्पर्क गरिदिनुहुन हार्दिक अनुरोध गर्दछु। Name: Sanjok Gurung Address: Kalika-03, Chitwan Passport No.: 07210466 Contact No.: 9811865710	राहदानी हरायो मिति २०७६।१०।०२ गते मोतिगडादेखि गाईघाटसम्म जाँदा मेरो निम्न व्यहोरा भएको राहदानी हराएको हुँदा पाउनु हुने महानुभावले नजिकको प्रहरी कार्यालय वा फोन नं. ९८४२८५६७३४ मा खबर गरिदिनु हुन अनुरोध गर्दछु। नाम: राजन कुमार कार्की राहदानी नं.: ०८०४०८१४ ठेगाना: राजापानी-६, खोटाङ्ग
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BRIEFING

Ministry proposes construction of 1,000-bed hospital

MAHOTTARI: The Ministry of Education Science and Technology has proposed to construct a medical college with a 1,000-bed hospital in Bardibas Municipality Ward No. 4. Devi Prasad Subedi, chief at the College Infrastructure Construction Development Project, said the project will soon prepare a detailed project report of the medical college.

Tiger found dead in Parsa

PARSA: A tiger was found dead at Panchamukhi Community Forest in Thori Rural Municipality on Wednesday. In the last two and a half months, two tigers have been found dead in Parsa district. There are 19 adult tigers in Parsa National Park.

Bhimphedi-Kulekhani tunnel way within three years

MAKWANPUR: Dubbed a provincial pride project, the Bhimphedi-Kulekhani tunnel way is expected to be completed within three years, according to Sahadev Bhandari, director at Transportation Infrastructure Directive. The construction of the 2.25km long and 11m wide road will cost an estimated Rs15 billion. A team of experts is currently carrying out the technical study of the tunnel way.

Tipplers carrying illegally extracted materials seized

MORANG: Police have seized four tipper trucks carrying illegally extracted riverbed materials from Netachok in Gramthan Rural Municipality. The trucks were confiscated while they were carrying riverbed material to the towns for construction. The trucks have been handed over to the local unit for punishment, according to police.

10-year jail for rhino killer

CHITWAN: Chitwan District Court on Friday sentenced a man to 10 years in jail and fined him Rs 50,000 for killing a rhino and selling its horn. Rudramani Giri, the registrar of the court, said District Judge Hemanta Rawal handed down the order against Gopal Praja Chepong of Ichchhakamana Rural Municipality Ward No. 7, who was accused of killing the rhino around 13 years ago.



POST FILE PHOTO

Child marriage is still prevalent in Makwanpur

According to the District Public Health Office, child marriage is most widespread in Chepong communities.

PRATAP BISTA
MAKWANPUR, MARCH 6

Fifteen-year-old Radhika Chepong of Katunje, a sixth-grader at Bhawani Secondary, dropped out of school this year following her marriage to Arun Chepong. Chepong, however, is not the only one from the school to get married at an early age, said Principal Balchandra Malla. In this academic session alone, eight students—all under age-of Bhawani Secondary got married. Another school, Suryodaya Secondary, in Raksirang, reported that 12 of its students got married as children this session.

“Those students who get married eventually drop out of school,” said Dipak Karki, principal of Suryodaya Secondary. “We teach students that child marriage is illegal and that it harms them on multiple fronts, but they still get married at a young age.”

Marrying early can lead to various health complications as well, said Ramesh Adhikari, chief of the Hetauda-based provincial health directive.

“Those who give birth before 20 suffer from uterus prolapse, among other reproductive health issues,” he said. “More worryingly, newly born children are exposed to long-term health risks.”

Despite multiple campaigns aiming to stop child marriage, the practice continues unabated in the district's rural belt, with schools reporting dozens of such cases in a single academic session.

“Traditional norms, poverty and illiteracy are contributing to the high rate of child marriage in the district,” Karki said. Malla said that a majority of parents in the rural belt feel they have to marry off their children once they reach puberty.

According to data provided by the District Public Health Office, child marriage is most widespread in the semi-nomadic Chepong communities of Makwanpur.

The district's rural municipalities report that 45 to 86 percent of children from Chepong communities get married between the ages of 12 and 18. Out of 237 marriages in Bhimphedi Rural Municipality in the fiscal year 2019/20, 58 were child marriages. Of those 58

cases, 75 percent of the couples had eloped.

“People in Chepong communities believe that marrying off their children at an early age is economical,” said Rajkumar Malla, chief of Raksirang Rural Municipality. “The families of a bride think they have fewer burdens when their girl child is married early; while for the family of a groom, marriage means extra work-force.”

Malla added that many people there don't even know that marrying before the age of 20 is illegal.

Bagmati Province plans to eradicate the practice within 2022 but numbers are not encouraging.

Almost all of the district's local units have plans and policies to curb child marriage but they have yet to effectively implement them, according to Tanka Moktan, chief of Kailash Rural Municipality. “On paper, child marriage is prohibited. But the rule hasn't been implemented effectively.”

The federal government has announced a plan to eradicate child marriage by 2030. But the Bagmati Provincial government has an even more ambitious plan to eradicate the practice within early 2022. The local units have floated policies to work towards that.

“We will at any cost make the province child marriage free by early 2022,” Dormani Poudel, chief minister of the province, declared. “Child marriage is a matter of shame to the province and the whole country.”

Among the 13 districts in the Bagmati Province, Nuwakot has the highest rate of child marriage with 62.58 percent; Dhading has 62.9 percent; Sindhuli 62.5 percent; and Makwanpur 59.7 percent, according to a recent data by the provincial ministry of social development.



POST PHOTO: MADHAV ARYAL

Farmers carry broom grass in Nisdi Rural Municipality, Palpa.

Elected official accused of constructing house by encroaching on forest land



POST PHOTO: GANESH CHAUDHARY

Around 140 families have built a settlement on the forest land of Lamkichuha Municipality.

GANESH CHAUDHARY
TIKAPUR, MARCH 6

An elected people's representative in Bhajani Municipality, Kailali, has constructed his house by encroaching on forest land, said officials of Bhajani Forest Office.

According to the office, Sher Bahadur Bohara, the ward member of Bhajani Ward No. 5, encroached the land belonging to local Shanti Community Forest and started con-

structing a concrete house.

“We attempted to recover the encroached forest land a few days ago. But the local unit assured us it would resolve the issue by holding talks among stakeholders. The local unit has not taken any decision so far,” said Shishir Lamsal, assistant forest officer. “The forest office was preparing to evict the encroacher with the help of the police. But the local unit stopped us,” he added.

A local youth club has been protest-

ing against Bohara after the latter started constructing a concrete house on the forest land. The forest office attempted to recover the encroached land by demolishing the structure after the club informed the office about it.

Bohara, however, refuted the allegations. “The community forest has constructed a trench to separate its land. The land where I am constructing the house is outside the boundary of the forest land. There are 15-16 other houses as well. I have not encroached the forest land,” said Bohara.

Talking to the Post, Mayor Sher Bahadur Chaudhary said that the municipal office had instructed Bohara to not construct the house on the forest land.

Encroachment of forest land is rampant in several places in the district. In Gorange area of Lamkichuha Municipality, around 140 families have built a settlement on forest land. Although Rani Jamara Kulariya Irrigation Project had acquired the land from by offering compensation to the locals a few years ago, the locals have still not cleared the land.

“We urged the forest office to evict them but to the locals have refused to leave the property,” said Lalbir Chaudhary, chairman of Jamara Canal Consumers' Committee.

Dozens of rural roads have been built in Parbat, but most of them are out of use



POST PHOTO: AGANDHAR TIWARI

Around 1,000km of roads in Parbat are still unmotorable.

AGANDHAR TIWARI
PARBAT, MARCH 6

Dozens of rural dirt tracks that were opened in Parbat district ahead of the 2017 local elections in Parbat district have become death traps.

The tracks, dug at the initiative of local leaders to woo voters, have raised the risk of landslides in many settlements.

In some places like Upper Bachha, multiple road projects were launched at once.

“The people of Upper Baccha did not need roads. Still, three road projects were launched in the village,” said Buddhiman Gurung, a local man. “None of the roads are in good condition. They have only raised the risk of landslides.”

Since the local elections three years ago, almost every settlement in Parbat has been connected to the district's road network. But most of the roads are in a poor state.

Even after the elections, the local governments in the district have prioritised the construction of roads, pouring more than 60 percent of their development budget in road construction.

Khagendra Tiwari, the chairman of Painyu Rural Municipality, admitted that a majority of local govern-

ments in Parbat had indeed placed inordinate priority on road projects.

“Other sectors such as social security, health, education, communication, agriculture, good governance and poverty alleviation have been sidelined as a result,” Tiwari said.

In Kandeni village of Modi Rural

Municipality, the 7km Patichaur-Deupur road was expected to be a boon for the villagers. But even after the construction of the road, the villagers are still carrying their agricultural produce to the market on their backs.

“The rural roads are of no use for us,” said Tulasiram Paudel, a local farmer.

Dayaram Adhikari, chief at the Infrastructure Development Office, said around 1,000km of roads in Parbat are still not motorable.

“Around Rs 2.5 billion of budget used in road construction have gone down the drain,” Adhikari said. “Most of the rural roads are in a dilapidated condition. Vehicles cannot move on these roads because of poor construction quality.”

Although the road has done nothing but poses landslide risks to many settlements, there's still unhealthy competition among the local units to open roads.



Nepal Government
Ministry Of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation
Narayanhiti Palace Museum and Republican
Monument and Operation Development committee

Notice

It is hereby notify that the Narayanhiti palace museum and Republican Monument management and operation development committee has decided to open the Republic Monument museum and Late king Birendra's residence Shree Sadan for the general public effective from April 13, 2020.

Visitors are required to pay for the entry ticket as given below:

- Free entrance only for Republican Monument from March 14, 2020 to April 12, 2020. (8 AM - 4 PM). Visitors should pay the entrance fee from April 13, 2020. Entrance Fee:
- Free entrance for the students below the age of 9 and senior citizens above the age of 70.
- Students : Rs. 50/-
- Nepali citizen : Rs. 200/-
- SAARC and Chinese national : Rs. 500/-
- Other countries : Rs. 1000/-



Bangad kupinde Municipality
Office of the Municipal Executive
Devastal, Salyan

INVITATION FOR BIDS

Invitation for Bids for procurement of Fabricated Steel Parts for Trail Bridges

Contract Identification No: BAKUNAPA/GOODS/NCB-08-2076/077

First Date of Publication: 2076/11/ 24

1. **Bangad kupinde Municipality Office of the Municipal executive Devastal Salyan** invites sealed bids from registered fabricators for supply of fabricated steel parts for following Trail Bridges.
2. Fabricators with experience of successfully completing fabrication and supply of steel parts for minimum five trail bridges within last five years are eligible for the bidding. New fabricators may also apply in joint venture with an eligible fabricator having the required experience. However, bids of such fabricators shall be considered responsive only in case fabricators fulfill the minimum requirements.
3. Eligible Fabricator may obtain further information and inspect the bidding documents at **Bangad kupinde Municipality Office of the Municipal executive Devastal Salyan**
4. Bidding documents may be purchased from the **Bangad kupinde Municipality Office of the Municipal executive Devastal Salyan** by eligible Fabricator, on submission of a written application and upon payment of a non-refundable fee for bid documents as mentioned in the following table, until the (last date of purchase of bidding document) 15 days from the first date of publication of this notice.
5. Bids must be submitted to the **Bangad kuppende Municipality Office Devastal Salyan** on or Before **2076/12/07 at 12:00 P.M.** Documents received after this deadline shall not be accepted.
6. Bids will be opened in the presence of Fabricator' representatives who choose to attend at Office of the Municipal executive Devastal Salyan 14:00 (2076/12/07). Bids must be valid for a period of **75 days** after bid opening and must be accompanied by bid security, as mentioned on following table.
7. If bidder wishes to submit the Bid Security in the form of cash, bidder has to deposit cash in Deposit in Laxmi Bank, Sallibazar Branch Account Number **Ga-3-1(06911003073)**.
8. If the last date of purchasing, submission and opening falls on a government holiday then the next working day shall be considered as the last day.
9. Pre-Bid Meeting shall be held at the office of The **(Bangad kupinde Municipality Office of the Municipal executive Devastal Salyan)**
10. The Purchaser reserves the right to accept or reject, wholly or partly any or all the bids without assigning any reason, whatsoever.
11. Other rules should be as per public procurement Act 2063, Public procurement Regulation 2064.
12. The name and identification of the contract are as follows:

Contract ID no.	Description of Work (Fabrication Package)	Estimated Amount, NRs (Excluding VAT) (Rs.)	Bid Security Amount	Bid Document Fee
BAKUNAPA/GOODS/ NCB-08-2076/077	Fabrication of steel parts and transportation up to road heads of Chisapani Steel Truss Bridge	Rs 957161.51	Rs 24000	1000

Chief Administrative Officer



A view of cherry blossoms at a tea garden in Yongfu Town of Zhangping City, southeast China's Fujian Province. This Thursday marked the day of Insects Awakening (Jingzhe), meaning hibernating worms come to life, the third of China's 24 solar terms.

OPEC oil cut deal in trouble as Russia still not on board

Moscow’s decision not to back the additional curbs could undermine cooperation between the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and Russia

REUTERS
VIENNA, MARCH 6

Russia will not back an OPEC call for extra oil output cuts and will only agree to extending existing curbs, a Russian source said on Friday, threatening to derail a plan by OPEC ministers for deeper reductions to cope with the coronavirus outbreak.

“That position won’t change,” the high-level Russian source told Reuters as ministers from OPEC, Russia and other producers, a group known as OPEC+, gathered for crunch talks at OPEC’s Vienna headquarters as the spreading virus has hit oil demand.

OPEC ministers had said on Thursday they backed an additional 1.5 million barrels per day (bpd) of oil cuts until the end of 2020, a much bigger and more extended move than expected, but they made the proposal conditional on Russia and other non-OPEC producers backing the curbs.

Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak has not made any public statements about the proposed extra cuts during his trips to and from Vienna this week, although Moscow has long indicated it was uneasy about any further output reductions.

“There is a problem. OPEC has no intention to cut without Russia. We need to do something or the consequences will be drastic for everyone,” a source from a Gulf producer said.

An OPEC source confirmed that Russia had rejected a deeper cut proposal during informal consultations on Friday. The informal consultations have delayed the start of the formal



A view shows Gazprom Neft's oil refinery in Omsk, Russia.

OPEC+ meeting by almost three hours.

Iranian Oil Minister Bijan Zanganeh, whose country is a member of OPEC but exempted from any curbs, said OPEC was still working with Russia and other non-OPEC states to reach a deal, the SHANA news agency reported.

The proposed new cuts would be on top of existing curbs of 2.1 million bpd under an OPEC+ deal due to expire in March. OPEC ministers have called for extending that deal as part of a new pact, taking total supply reductions to about 3.6 million bpd.

Moscow’s decision not to back the additional curbs could undermine cooperation between the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and Russia, an informal alliance that has propped up oil prices since 2016.

Oil prices extended their decline after comment by the high-level Russian source with Brent prices falling as much as 5 percent to below \$48 a barrel.

Prices lost more than a quarter of their value since the start of the year, as the global economic outlook darkened under the shadow of the coronavirus.

Trump says US economy could take hit from coronavirus

REUTERS
SCRANTON (UNITED STATES), MARCH 6

President Donald Trump said on Thursday the US economy might take a hit from the coronavirus outbreak but predicted the challenge would eventually pass and defended his handling of the crisis.

Trump appeared at his first town hall meeting of the 2020 election season, an event conducted by Fox News Channel before an audience in Scranton, Pennsylvania, a battleground state that helped propel him to the White House in 2016.

The spreading coronavirus has led to a steep downturn in the stock market and fanned fears of an economic dip just as the Republican president asks Americans for a second term.

Asked if the coronavirus outbreak hurt the economy, Trump said: “It certainly might have an impact. At the same time, I have to say people are now staying in the United States spending their money in the US, and I like that.”

“It’s going to all work out. Everybody has to be calm,” he said. “We have plans for every single possibility and I think that’s what we have to do. We hope it doesn’t last too long.”

Trump repeated his assertion that the travel restrictions he imposed on China early in the crisis had helped limit the outbreak in the United States. The US death toll from the coronavirus rose to 12 on Thursday and 53 new cases broke out across the country. More than 3,200 people worldwide have died from the respiratory illness that can lead to pneumonia.

Trump has faced criticism from Democrats for not having the country properly prepared for the possibility of a pandemic.

“I think people are viewing us as



US President Donald Trump waves to reporters as he departs for travel to Scranton, Pennsylvania from the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, US, on Thursday.

having done a very good job. What we have to do is do a professional job. Nobody is blaming us for the virus,” he said. “This started in China.”

The US Senate on Thursday passed an \$8.3 billion bill to combat the outbreak, a day after the House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved it. The bill now goes to Trump for his signature.

Asked about his reputation as a germophobe and how he is responding to doctors’ recommendations to avoid shaking hands to guard against the spread of the coronavirus, Trump said nobody could operate as a politician without shaking people’s hands.

“The bottom line is I shake anybody’s hand now. I’m proud of it,” Trump said. “You know, you’re hearing a lot of stuff about trying not to shake hands. ... It hasn’t stopped me at all.”

Trump also weighed in on the race for the Democratic presidential nomination to face him in the Nov. 3 election. That contest took a sharp turn on

Super Tuesday this week, with former Vice President Joe Biden surging ahead of Senator Bernie Sanders in what has become a two-man battle.

“I was all set for Bernie,” Trump said, adding that Sanders would have benefited if fellow liberal Senator Elizabeth Warren had dropped out sooner. She withdrew from the race on Thursday.

Democratic moderates, including former presidential candidates Michael Bloomberg, Amy Klobuchar and Pete Buttigieg, have rallied behind Biden in recent days amid concerns that nominating Sanders, a self-avowed democratic socialist, would harm the party’s chances in November.

Asked whether his polarizing style deepened the US political divide, Trump defended how he conducted his personal messaging through tweeting and the like.

“When they hit us, we have to hit back. I really feel that. ... I wouldn’t be here if I had turned the other cheek,” he said.

Tax trouble: Indonesia’s luxury car ‘owners’ cry foul

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
JAKARTA, MARCH 6

No one was more surprised to learn that Dimas Prayitno owned a Rolls-Royce than the 21-year-old Indonesian himself, who was baffled when told he owed \$15,000 in taxes on the luxury vehicle.

But a look at the construction worker’s home in a rundown neighbourhood quickly convinced officials that Prayitno was the latest victim of tax evasion by one of Jakarta’s wealthy elite.

Rampant tax dodging costs Indonesia billions of dollars in lost revenue annually and it has taken on a renewed urgency as Jakarta moves to pass a raft of bills aimed at revving up Southeast Asia’s biggest economy and adding millions of poor to the middle class.

“I was shocked and asked them ‘what car?’” Prayitno told AFP about his visit from tax officials.

“How could I afford a car when you see me living in a house like this?” Prayitno—whose top pay is about 150,000 rupiah (\$10) a day—later learned he’d been duped by a former boss who took his government ID card ostensibly for a legitimate purpose.

But instead, the employer registered his luxury car in Prayitno’s name to dodge taxes.

About 350 Rolls-Royces, Ferraris

and other top-end cars in Indonesia’s capital—punctuated by a yawning divide between rich and poor—are improperly listed in the name of low-income people like Prayitno, the tax agency said.

But it’s just a fraction of the tax evasion problem.

In December, the CEO of state-owned airline Garuda Indonesia was sacked after allegedly smuggling a Harley-Davidson motorbike and expensive bicycles into the country on a commercial plane.

He was accused of using a subordinate’s name on import papers to avoid detection—and taxes.

Days later, Indonesia’s customs office said it had foiled a separate plot to smuggle dozens of luxury cars and motorbikes in mislabelled shipping containers to dodge more than \$3 million in levies.

“We’re going to crack down on this illegal activity,” finance minister Sri Mulyani said at the time.

“The contents of the shipping containers were listed as bricks but we found cars instead.”

Last year, the Global Financial Integrity Report (GFI) estimated Indonesia lost some \$6.5 billion in tax revenue in 2016 due to mislabeling on goods flowing in and out of the country.

The corruption-riddled Southeast Asian archipelago of more than 260



The smuggling of luxury items such as high-end cars costs Indonesia billions of dollars in lost tax revenue each year.

million is also one of the world’s worst for illegal movements of funds across international borders, according to GFI.

Indonesia has one of the lowest tax-to-GDP ratios regionally and the World Bank in January called for better tax collection efforts.

The call comes as parliament debates a raft of new legislation that

would cut corporate taxes while making big internet firms pay more levies, part of a broader effort to cut red tape and loosen rigid labour laws to spur investment.

But raising domestic tax revenue is also key as President Joko Widodo kicks off a second term with plans for more costly infrastructure spending, including a planned move of the capi-

tal to Borneo island from congested Jakarta.

In 2016, Jakarta offered an amnesty for tax evaders who would declare their hidden assets at home and abroad, which raked in levies totalling nearly \$10 billion. But that was just a fraction of assets thought to be stashed away.

Registering a car, a company or other property in the names of low-income people and subordinates is a common scheme used by wealthy Indonesians to avoid paying tax, experts said.

“Authorities should look at the beneficial owners not the people who are used to register that wealth,” said Fair Tax Forum researcher Nurkholis Hidayat.

“It’s been a problem for a long time but if the government manages to crack down on it that could help boost tax-collection efforts.”

Recently, Jakarta tax officers started slapping a “tax not paid” sticker on offside cars in rich parts of the city.

But it is cold comfort for victims like Prayitno.

The construction worker wants to become a ride-hailing driver for steadier work, but banks refused him a loan after the Rolls-Royce affair.

“I’ve been rejected three times because of the tax problem. But they’ve all seen my home and know that I was manipulated,” he said.

WeDoctor invites banks to lead \$1 b Hong Kong IPO

REUTERS
HONG KONG, MARCH 6

WeDoctor will push ahead with a Hong Kong listing and invite pitches from investments banks next week to lead an IPO valuing the Chinese healthcare platform at up to \$10 billion, two sources with direct knowledge of the matter said.

The Hangzhou-based company, which is backed by Tencent Holdings Ltd and Goldman Sachs, could look to raise up to \$1 billion in the IPO, and could be among the first major Hong Kong listings since the coronavirus outbreak began.

WeDoctor has invited investment banks in Hong Kong and mainland China to a ‘beauty parade’, which will be held via video conferencing and in person at the company’s offices for bankers located in China, three sources said.

Founded in 2010 by artificial intelligence expert Jerry Liao, WeDoctor has more than 210 million registered users mainly in China for its online appointment booking, prescription and diagnosis services.

It is also linked to about 3,200 hospitals and 360,000 doctors.

FOREX		
US Dollar		118.32
Euro		134.06
Pound Sterling		154.11
Japanese Yen		11.24
Chinese Yuan		17.08
Qatari Riyal		32.50
Australian Dollar		78.66
Malaysian Ringit		28.36
Saudi Arab Riyal		31.54
Exchange rates fixed by Nepal Rastra Bank		
BULLION		
PRICE PER TOLA		
 Fine Gold		Rs 82,500
 Silver		Rs 890
SOURCE: FENEGOSIDA		



SERVO 4T
ENGINE OILS
100% PERFORMANCE. EVERYTIME.



Petrol (Per Litre)
Rs 108.00/-

Diesel (Per Litre)
Rs 97.00/-

Kerosene (Per Litre)
Rs 97.00/-

LPG (Per cylinder)
Rs 1375/-

Source: Nepal Oil Corporation

India’s Yes Bank plunges 60 percent, depositors rush to withdraw funds



REUTERS
People wait outside a Yes Bank branch to withdraw their money in Ahmedabad, India, on Friday.

REUTERS
BENGALURU/MUMBAI/NEW DELHI, MARCH 6

Shares in India’s Yes Bank Ltd plunged 60 percent on Friday as panicky depositors rushed to withdraw funds after the central bank took control in a dramatic late-night move and limited withdrawals from the troubled lender. The shock move by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) followed months of steady deterioration in the financial position of the country’s fifth-largest private lender and growing concerns over governance. Shares of Yes Bank plunged as much as 85 percent to wipe out more than \$1 billion of market value, marking the biggest intra-day fall in an Indian blue-chip stock. By early afternoon, the stock was down 60 percent after paring losses. As thousands of customers rushed to pull out funds and tempers flared at overcrowded branches nationwide, police deployed in some states to help control the crowds. Many business owners feared the central bank’s move would hit their operations too, as the lender, with 1,000 branches across India, has many commercial clients. “I will struggle to pay salaries to my staff, or pay any of my vendors, because of the restrictions,” said Chintan Patel, a building contractor in the western city of Ahmedabad. Many customers took to social media to complain that the bank’s online system was down, preventing fund transfers, while payment apps, such as PhonePe, which use Yes Bank to help process transactions, were also affected. “Effectively, Yes Bank should have no equity value left,” said Sandip Sabharwal, a Mumbai-based fund manager. “Ideally, trading should be suspended till formal restructuring is announced.” The rout of Yes Bank sent the broader market and the banking index into a tailspin. As global markets reeled from uncertainty over a coronavirus outbreak, the debacle sent the NSE Nifty 50 tumbling as much as 3.9 percent to its lowest since last September. The Nifty Bank Index was down 4.65 percent by 0630 GMT. The RBI placed Yes Bank under a moratorium on Thursday, and said it would swiftly work on a revival plan.

Government issues 35-day ultimatum to non-paying casinos and hotels

The firms have been told to settle their overdue royalties and taxes totalling Rs 1.57 billion with penalty and interest.

SANGAM PRASAIN
KATHMANDU, MARCH 6

The government on Friday issued a strongly worded ultimatum to non-paying casinos, mini casinos and hotel operators to clear their outstanding payments totalling more than Rs1.57 billion within 35 days or face legal action. The defaulting firms have been told to settle their overdue royalties and taxes with penalty and interest. The Kumari Chowk Office, which reviews the government accounts under the Office of the Auditor General, published the names of the debtors and their ancestors going back two generations in its notice published on Friday. The office said that it took action after these casinos failed to clear the dues despite repeated reminders. “If they do not make payment, the government will confiscate their properties and auction them off to recover the arrears,” the notice said. As per the notice, Rakesh Wadhwa, the fugitive owner of Nepal Recreation Centre, owes the highest amount of Rs736 million. The company owns around 3.5 ropanis of land and a house at Kalimati. Nepal Recreation Centre used to operate four casinos—Casino Nepal housed at the Hotel Soaltee Crowne Plaza, Casino Anna at the Hotel Annapurna, Casino Tara at the Hotel Hyatt Regency and Casino Everest at the Hotel Everest—all of which have shut down. In June 2011, the government annulled the operating licence of Nepal Recreation Centre after it failed to pay taxes and royalties owed to the government. Piyyush Bahadur Amatya, chairman of The Fulbari Resort & Spa that used to house Casino Fulbari, has outstanding payments amounting to Rs339.31 million. Radhe Shyam Saraf, chairman of the Hotel Yak and Yeti that houses Casino Royale, owes Rs163.35 million to the government. The now-defunct Casino Anna, operated by Tapta Bahadur Bista under Annapurna International, has



SHUTTERSTOCK
In April 2014, the government decided to shut down all casinos not fulfilling the Casino Regulation 2013 and scrap the licences of those defaulting on royalties.

debts totalling Rs160.83 million to the government. A notice has been issued in the name of Dinesh Bahadur Bista, executive chairman of the Hotel Soaltee that owes Rs84.37 million, Surendra Bahadur Singh, operator of mini casinos under the name Happy Hour, owes Rs75.36 million; and RD Tuttle, who opened Nepal’s first modern casino, Casino Nepal under Nepal Recreation Centre, owes Rs18.40 million. “We have not published the dues

Company	Dues
Nepal Recreation Centre	Rs 736 million
The Fulbari Resort & Spa	Rs 339.31 million
Hotel Yak and Yeti	Rs 163.35 million
Annapurna International	Rs 160.83 million
Hotel Soaltee	Rs 84.37 million
Happy Hour	Rs 75.36 million
RD Tuttle	Rs 18.40 million

owed by Casino Everest that was housed at the Hotel Everest because of an ongoing court case,” said Jeevan Prakash Mahotra, chief of the Kumari Chowk Office. “There are other casinos that have not paid royalties and taxes to the government, but we have not published their names because the Department of Tourism has not sent us the details.” The department said the Radisson Hotel and eight mini casinos located outside the Kathmandu Valley owe the government millions in annual royalties. In April 2014, the government decided to shut down all casinos not fulfilling the Casino Regulation 2013 and scrap the licences of those defaulting on royalties. However, these casinos and mini casinos continue to operate taking advantage of the Supreme Court’s interim order that allows them to remain open. As per the regulation, casino opera-

Global markets extend slump as coronavirus crisis deepens

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
LONDON, MARCH 6

Stock markets collapsed Friday and oil tumbled on heightened panic over coronavirus and its predicted devastating damage to global economic growth, dealers said. Haven investments gold and the yen surged as the World Health Organization (WHO) warned that the epidemic must be taken seriously. In midday deals, the Paris stock market tanked 4.1 percent, Frankfurt dived 3.9 percent, London shed 3.4 percent, Madrid lost 3.6 percent and Milan tumbled 3.8 percent in a fierce global markets selloff that began about two weeks ago. With no end in sight to the spreading COVID-19 disease, Tokyo stocks shipped 2.7 percent by the close, Shanghai fell 1.2 percent and Hong Kong erased 2.3 percent on heightened investor panic. Oil, already slumping on virus-linked demand fears, extended losses to more than 5.0 percent on reports Russia wants to delay deeper output cuts recommended by its OPEC allies. “Stocks are on the back foot once again, with markets tumbling amid continued growth in the coronavirus crisis,” said analyst Joshua Mahony at IG trading group. “The stimulus-led rebound in global stocks has been short-lived, with fears over an escalation of the coronavirus crisis providing yet another bout of

selling across European markets.” While governments and central banks have unleashed or prepared to roll out stimulus measures, the rapid spread of the disease and rising death toll are putting a strain on economies and stoking concerns of a worldwide recession. The US Federal Reserve sprang a surprise half-point interest rate cut on Tuesday in an attempt to stem devastating fallout. But as coronavirus continues its rapid spread—almost 100,000 people in 85 countries have now been infected—investors are fleeing risk assets such as stocks for financial havens. “With the economic impact of coronavirus large and rising, policymakers in advanced economies are being forced to react,” said economist Adam Slater at research group Oxford Economics. “But conventional monetary and fiscal options like the US Federal Reserve’s recent emergency rate cut, may not be enough.” WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, meanwhile, warned that “this is not a drill” as outbreaks surged in Europe and the United States, where medical workers warned over a “disturbing” lack of hospital preparedness. With dealers flocking to safety and yields on US Treasuries at record lows, gold has rocketed more than five percent this week to sit at more than seven-year highs.



REUTERS
People wearing protective face masks walk past a screen showing Nikkei index, following the outbreak of the coronavirus, outside a brokerage in Tokyo, Japan.



A shopkeeper displays toy water guns and balloons for the upcoming Holi festival at Ason in Kathmandu.

Coronavirus fears spark panic buying nationwide as government urges calm

KRISHANA PRASAIN
KATHMANDU, MARCH 6

The government said on Friday that it has a sufficient amount of essential goods like petroleum, food and medicines after fears of the coronavirus sparked panic buying at retail shops across the country. Industry Minister Lekh Raj Bhatta said that there are no shortages of essential goods in the market but buyers are still stocking up. “It’s because we have a weak supply chain and lack coordination among government bodies that often causes panic among consumers to stockpile goods.” Chandra Ghimire, secretary at the ministry, said that the government has been working on regulating and inspecting the market actively. “If traders are found involved in unfair trade practices to earn a quick buck to take advantage of a crisis period, they will face action,” he said.

Surendra Poudel, general manager at Nepal Oil Corporation, said liquefied petroleum gas plants are supplying 30,000 gas cylinders daily in the Kathmandu Valley. However, long lines can be seen as consumers rush to secure a cylinder. Similarly, the government is also planning to operate a hotline number so that consumers can complain if they face any problem in getting essential goods and the inspection team will work immediately off their tip, Bhatta said. Bhatta said that the report from Food Management and Trading Company, Salt Trading and traders shows that there is enough stock of daily essential items to last six months, with enough liquid petroleum gas to last a month. Rather than fearing and panic buying, consumers need to be aware and stay alert, said Bhatta. “The government has done the necessary preparation for smooth supply

Nissan pushes on with new vehicle plan at UK factory despite Brexit warning

REUTERS
LONDON, MARCH 6

Nissan is pushing on with plans to build its new Qashqai sports utility vehicle at its British factory despite warnings over Brexit, announcing on Friday a 52-million pound investment in a new press line at the site. The Japanese carmaker has said that if Britain’s departure from the European Union leads to tariffs, its European business, which also includes a plant in Barcelona, would be unsustainable. It said it would build the new Qashqai at its northern English Sunderland site in 2016 after government reassurances that Brexit would not hit competitiveness, reflecting how far in advance investment decisions are made for a vehicle due around the start of 2021. “Our team in the UK continues to set the standard for productivity and quality,” said Chief Operating Officer Ashwani Gupta. Globally, Nissan is grappling with the need to accelerate cost-cutting and rebuild profits, repair its partnership with France’s Renault and handle the fallout from former boss Carlos Ghosn’s arrest. It currently builds the LEAF, Qashqai and Juke models in Britain, where it directly employs more than 7,000 people, but it axed premium Infiniti vehicles last year, cutting output, and has been hit by a slump in diesel demand. The new extra-large press line is part of a 400 million-pound (\$520 million) investment for the vehicle on top of the 100 million pounds spent for the new Juke, which entered production last year and has reached an output of 35,000. Nissan’s Sunderland site, Britain’s biggest car plant, built nearly 350,000 vehicles in 2019, down almost a third since a recent high of over 500,000 cars in 2016. Although Britain formally left the bloc in January, trading terms with Europe will remain unchanged until the end of the year after which a new partnership, which has yet to be negotiated, will come into force.

ON SATURDAY



Chinmaya Kanung depended on the money her husband sent from Malaysia for years until she started rearing livestock and tailoring.



After attending a financial literacy class, and by using remittance money, Ganga Chuhan started rearing buffaloes, goats and chicken.



Phumisara Thapa started a tailoring shop and a pig farm with the remittance money her husband sent. She makes around Rs 25,000 a month.



From her cucumber and blackbean farms, Devi Maya Pandey earns enough to keep her husband from leaving for labour work abroad.

By investing remittance money in businesses, women are turning things around for them.

In one Nawalpur village...

>> Continued from page 1

When Thapa’s husband first left for Malaysia six years ago, his monthly salary was 1,000 Malaysian Ringgit, equivalent to Rs28,000 at the then exchange rate.

“What we grew in our fields was barely enough to feed the family. For everything else, we depended on my husband’s income,” said Thapa. “But the money he sent was not enough.”

According to labour migration experts, the majority of Nepalis who travel to countries in the Gulf and to Malaysia for work do so to provide for their family’s basic needs.

“The vast majority of them come from lower-middle-class backgrounds, and their basic reason for opting for foreign labour is to provide food, clothing, and shelter to their families in Nepal,” said Ganesh Gurung, executive chairperson of the government’s Policy Research Institute, who has conducted extensive research on migration issues. “This is the reason why the majority of remittance money that flows into the country is used for consumption.”

In 2019, a survey by Sharecast Initiative Nepal, a non-profit distribution company, showed that 60 percent of remittance money was used to buy food, 42 percent for clothing, 36 percent for medical treatment, and 35 percent for children’s education.

But when a family spends all of the remittance money fulfilling basic needs, it leaves them with no savings to fall back on during hard times. Thapa realised this a few years ago when her grandmother-in-law fell ill and had to be hospitalised. To cover her medical expenses, the family had to take a loan of Rs130,000.

It was an understanding of this precarity that led Thapa to attend financial literacy classes provided by The Safer Migration Project, a bilateral initiative of the governments of Nepal and Switzerland, two years ago.

“Not only did the classes teach us the importance of saving money and keeping track of expenses, but they also served as an awakening from my economically unsustainable life,” said Thapa. “The classes made me realise how irresponsible it was of me to depend solely on my husband’s income to take care of the family’s needs.”

Remittance is upending gender roles in Nepali society to a large extent. As men leave the country in droves for destinations abroad, it is the women who now have to take up traditionally male jobs, according to Gurung, of the government’s Policy Research Institute .

After starting her cucumber farm, Thapa enrolled in a free government-run tailoring class and after two months of training, she started her own tailoring shop, which is located in a room in her parents’ house. The shop is sparsely decorated, but in one corner is her sewing machine, which she bought with the money her husband sent.

“Now, my husband is very happy and proud of all that I have managed to do. He has become very supportive,” she said. “A few months ago, my husband and I decided to buy some land in the village, and I contributed Rs50,000 of my own money.”

Jugepani is where Nepal’s flatlands hug the hills, giving it a unique geographical layout. To the north of the village are hills covered with sal trees. Where the hills end, the land flattens. Here, the majority of houses have been built with remittance money.

“Almost every family has at least one member working abroad,” said 41-year-old local Devi Maya Pandey.

For those living in the village, the fertile lands are one of the primary means to make a living from. At this time of the year, most of the village’s fields are blanketed with bright yellow mustard flowers. The majority of those tending the fields are women and elderly men.

But in the fields that the Pandey household owns, both Devi and her 47-year-old husband Lila Nath Pandey are working. In one section of the family’s fields, there are potatoes and a few metres away are cucumbers. Under the bamboo frames built to support the cucumber creepers, the family has planted black-eyed beans. While Devi digs potatoes from the ground, Lila carefully inspects the creepers.

This time two years ago, Lila was working for an advertising merchandise retail company in Dubai. He returned to Nepal in 2018 and hasn’t left the country since.

The first time Lila left for foreign employment was in 1999. He and Devi got married the same year, and just 21 days after the wedding, he left for Bahrain.

“I had no option. I was making just Rs1,000 a month from my teaching job, and our family’s financial condition was weak,” said Lila.

The job in Bahrain came with a monthly salary of Rs14,000. Before

flying to Bahrain, Lila had already incurred a loan of Rs30,000 to pay for his passport and air tickets.

While Lila was away in Bahrain, Devi started working as a teacher to supplement her husband’s income. “I didn’t want our family to be reliant on only one source of income,” said Devi. But after she gave birth to her second daughter, juggling taking care of her daughters, household work, and a full-time job proved too challenging. She had to quit her job.

“Even though Lila always made sure I had pocket money, I didn’t like that I was now completely reliant on his salary,” said Devi. “So I decided to start a small-scale commercial vegetable farm with the money Lila sent back.”

Devi’s small farm became successful, so much that she was able to purchase more land, expand the farm, and add livestock.

In 2018, when Lila returned from Dubai, Devi asked him to stay back. She had proven that the family could earn enough money from farming and livestock rearing.

“He has paid a huge price to provide for the family. Since he could only visit Nepal for two months every two years, he wasn’t there when I gave birth to all three of our children. My daughters, aged 17 and 12, grew up without a father figure. Every time he came home, they hesitated to open up to him. My heart used to break. So when he came home in 2018, I knew I should convince him to stay back,” said Devi.

The couple now works together in the family’s fields. This year, the family made a profit of Rs300,000 from growing and selling cucumbers. Devi said that the family can comfortably make Rs500,000 to 700,000 a year from farming alone.

Remittance has been crucial in alleviating poverty in the country. According to the Multidimensional Poverty Index, published by the Nepal Planning Commission in 2018, the country reduced the percentage of people termed multidimensionally poor by 50 percent between 2006 to 2014, largely due to remittance, says Gurung. The corresponding increase in people’s purchasing power also played an important role in strengthening the country’s economy.

As much remittance helps to lift people out of poverty, it just as often ends up trapping people in a cycle of migration.

“When families end up spending all their remittance money on consumption, it leaves them in a very precarious position,” said Gurung. “In such a situation, the migrant worker gets trapped in a cycle of stint-after-stint of employment abroad. It also leaves the families in a very vulnerable position. It is therefore extremely important that families save money to invest in the productive sector.”

The loans that most migrants take to fly abroad end up accumulating interest at high rates, forcing migrants to go abroad repeatedly in order to pay off the loans. This happens because interest rates are high, and also because remittance money is not nearly enough to pay back loans while also providing for daily consumption needs. According to Nepal Living Standards Survey 2011, 79 percent of remittance money that enters the country goes into consumption while 7 percent into repayment of loans.

But by investing remittance money in small-scale businesses, women like Devi are turning things around for them.

In Jugepani, Devi’s husband isn’t the only one who hasn’t had to migrate again. Around a kilometre from Devi’s house lives Chinmaya Kanung. For years, Kanung depended on her husband’s remittance money.

“The money that my husband sent from Malaysia was what helped us cover the family’s expenses. I was just a subsistence farmer, but as the cost of living got higher and higher, I felt that it was important that I start working and earn money too,” said Kanung.

After attending the same financial literacy class with Phumisara Thapa, Kanung started a tailoring training centre with just one sewing machine, which she bought by selling a pig she had reared. Two years later, the centre now has five sewing machines, and Kanung has seven students learning tailoring from her.

“Business has been good, and I have invested some of my savings into pigs,” said Kanung, who said that she makes around Rs35,000 from the tailoring centre and Rs100,000 annually from rearing pigs.

Five months ago, Kanung’s husband returned from Malaysia. He has no plans of returning soon. “My husband has taken over the responsibility of the livestock and the fields, while I focus on the tailoring centre,” said Kanung. The family recently finished building a spacious goat shed and now plans to increase the number of goats and pigs they rear.

Roughly 5 kms from Jugepani, in Srijanshil Tole of Kawasoti-3, the village’s women have taken it upon themselves to support each other in becoming more financially secure. Last march, 22 women aged 25 to 50 pooled together Rs15,000 each from the remittance they had received to start the Srijanshil Mahila Organic Krishak Samuha, an all-women organic agro-business.

The group now grows vegetables on five bighas of land it has leased. They have two spacious greenhouses to grow vegetables and a sizable pond, which is used to irrigate the farm.

Ganga Chuhan, leader of the group, admits that she wasn’t always an enterprising person. “I used to fit the stereotypical migrant worker’s wife who does nothing much except spend her husband’s money,” she said. “Every time my husband sent money, I would buy myself and my children new clothes, expensive things to eat, and as a result, I saved very little money.”

But again, a financial literacy class led her to realise the importance of saving money and being financially independent, she said. After attending the class, Chuhan started focusing on rearing buffaloes, goats and chicken, using the money that her husband was sending home.

“Now I make Rs20,000 a month by selling buffalo milk, and Rs80,000 to 90,000 a year by selling goats,” said Chuhan, who has also started commercial vegetable farming. In two years time, Chuhan says her husband will be returning to the village for good. By that time, the Srijanshil Mahila Organic Krishak Samuha will be fully operational. She will focus on the women’s group while he focuses on the family’s farm and livestock.

Reinvesting remittance money into productive sectors not only has been providing supplemental income to migrant families but has also been helping buttress their financial strength over the long term.

But economists say that investing remittance money in the productive sector is easier said than done.

“The government needs to first identify the different categories of migrant workers sending remittance to Nepal. For example, those who work in countries like Singapore, Hong Kong and Brunei get paid better and hence send more money compared to those in the Gulf countries and Malaysia,” said economist Raghurir Bista. “The government will then have to make specific interventions tailored to specific categories of migrant workers.”

Gurung said that migrant workers in the Gulf countries and Malaysia start investing their money into productive sectors after almost 10 years of working abroad.

“That’s how long it usually takes to achieve some level of financial security for the majority of migrant workers,” said Gurung. Those who do invest, do so in very traditional sectors—farming, livestock rearing, and tailoring.

Experts say the government has a huge role to play to ensure remittance money is invested in productive sectors. According to Rajan Prasad Shrestha, executive director of Foreign Employment Board under the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, the government has identified 39 districts with high outward flow of labour migrants and has been providing them with different training programmes.

“These programmes are targeted at families of migrant workers to encourage them to invest in productive sectors,” said Shrestha. “In more than 30 districts, we provide counselling on how to follow proper legal processes while applying for jobs abroad and the kind of government protection they are eligible for.”

In 2019, the board also started providing free training in 19 different skills. This training programme prioritises returnee migrant workers, families of migrant workers, women, and those from socially and economically disadvantaged groups, said Shrestha.

“We also have another programme under which returnee migrant workers can receive a Rs1 million loan to start businesses, provided their business proposal is convincing,” said Shrestha.

Back in Jugepani, as Phumisara Thapa helps her parents till the fields near their house, she says that being financially independent has completely changed her life.

“I spent so many years of my married life limited within the four walls of my house, but after I started my small businesses, I began to find myself becoming more open and confident,” said Thapa. “Earlier, I had to ask for money from my husband for the smallest of things, but now, people come to me to ask for loans.”



Students celebrate Holi at Silgadhi in Doti in 1967.



Children celebrate Holi in Kathmandu in 1964.



Holi celebration at a school in Gulmi in 1966.



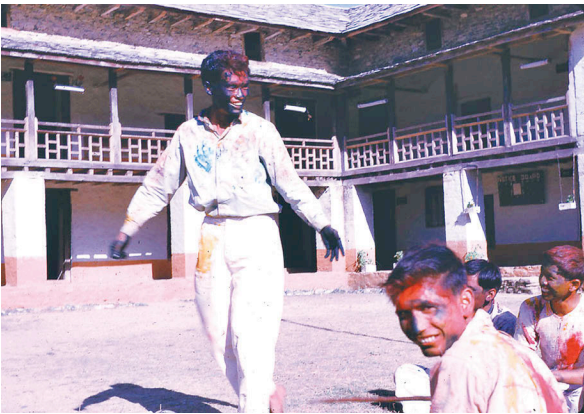
Villagers at Biruwa Guthi in Parsa celebrate Holi in 1967.



Tharu boys stop traffic at the East-West highway during Holi in 1967 in Chitwan.



Children and youths in Matepani, Pokhara, throw *abir* in air as part of Holi celebrations in 1964.



Holi celebration at Bharse High School, Gulmi, in 1966.



Children at a water pump play Holi in Gadhimai, Bara, in 1969.



A peace corp volunteer takes a picture of children in Pokhara in 1963.



Children of Bhadrapur High School in Jhapa pose for a photo in 1966.



School girls in Dhankuta during Holi in 1967.

Holi: Once upon a time

The fesitval of colours, without fear and only freedom.

PHOTOS: NEPAL HISTORY PROJECT/ US PEACE CORPS

Nepal is set to be painted all shades of the rainbow in the next few days, as people take to the streets to throw and smear colour on each other, despite viral concerns over Covid-19.

Phagu Purnima or Holi, the festival of colours, is upon the country once more, and will be celebrated in the Kathmandu Valley and the hilly region on Monday and in Tarai on Tuesday. Though all ages participate in the celebrations, the festival is most dear to children who can be found gathering in the streets, carrying packets of colours, lola (paint-filled plastic packets), and buckets of water—no one is safe from the kaleidoscopic onslaught.

While every year the festival is celebrated with great fervour, this year's revelry will likely be affected by the fear of the Covid-19 outbreak, as Kathmandu District Administration Office has urged the public to refrain from gathering in large groups. The plea comes as the death toll from the virus, which was first detected in Wuhan, China, has killed more than 3,200 people in 85 countries.

So, for this edition of our once upon a time series, the Post brings you photos of Holi celebrations taken in the 1960s and 70s across Nepal.

This photo essay is part of our Once Upon a Time series, featuring photographs taken by US Peace Corps volunteers in the 1960s and 70s. To see more photo essays in the series, visit [tkpo.st/eka-deshma](#)



Children with *abir* on their faces at a village in Lamjung in 1966.



Tharu girls dance on the Rapti River Road stopping traffic during Holi in 1967.



Boys with drums and peacock feathers dance on the Rapti River Road in Chitwan during Holi festival in 1967.

BOOKS

‘Enough critical discussion is not taking place’

Bidur Dangol, owner of Vajra Books, talks about the publishing industry, the reading culture in Nepal, and all things books.

Bidur Dangol’s life has always revolved around bookstores. The earliest memory he has of one is his five-year-old self walking through shelves of books, picking up anything that looked interesting and sitting down in a corner with it for hours on end. His family owned one of the few bookstores in the city, back in the 70s, and every evening after school got over, he’d rush to the bookstore.

“I had nowhere else to go,” says Dangol, owner of Vajra Books, a bookstore and publishing house in Thamel. “It was good for me though. I was introduced to the business of books very young.” His family then went on to open another bookstore, the popular Mandala Book Point, before he started his own venture in 2003, with Vajra Books. The Post’s **Marissa Taylor** recently caught up with the publisher to talk about the publishing industry, the reading culture in Nepal and all things books. Excerpts:

How did you come to love books?

I was born into a joint family with limited financial resources. At that time, many people didn’t send their children to school, but my parents did, despite their limited means. My family had a bookstore in Ghanta Ghar, called Himalayan Book Store, where I’d spend entire days amongst books. Then my eldest brother, Madhav Lal Maharjan, opened Mandala Book Point, where I worked from 1989 till 2003. I think I developed my passion for the book business while I worked there, which is why I decided to open Vajra.

And did you always want to get into publishing?

If you run a bookstore long enough, you want to get into publishing. I realised my dream of becoming a publisher in 2004 with the publication of Martino Nicoletti’s book *Riddum: The Voice of the Ancestors*. Since then, I’ve published over 200 works—mostly academics. Another book we published that is special to me is *From Goddess to Mortal*, a story told by Rashmila Shakya, a Kumari, to the writer Scott Berry. It puts to rest various superstitions regarding Kumaris, and talks about how Rashmila lived a regular ‘normal’ life, got married, and had a family.

You publish works that are mostly in English, and mostly non-fiction, particularly on Buddhism and the social sciences. Why is that?

Vajra mostly specialises in Buddhism, Himalayan studies, history, anthropology and cultural studies. Most of my customers are international students and scholars, and the same could be said of my authors. The majority of my customers speak English, thus my primary focus has been on producing English language publications. But besides English, I also publish works in Nepali, French, and Tibetan. I’ve published about 10 books in the Nepali language, most of which are fiction.

How do you select books to publish?

We publish around 10-12 books every year from our publication house. We don’t have an editorial board as such, but I do consult scholars and published authors about the manuscripts I go through and to help with editorial work. An example of a hugely important work is the two-volume *Kathmandu Valley: The Preservation of Physical Environment and Cultural Heritage*. Another book that I felt needed to be published was *Man and his house in the Himalayas: Ecology of Nepal* by the French anthropologist Gérard Toffin. Among more recent works, *Mustang in Black and White* is something I really liked. It features photographs by Kevin Bubriski and text by Sienna Craig. *Boudha: The Great Stupa*, with photos by Mani Lama and text by Mimi Carol Durham, is another treasure we recently published.

What are you currently reading? How do you select books to read?

Currently, I am reading the *Joy of Living: Unlocking the Secret and Science of Happiness*, by Erix Swanson and Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche. I am also reading the *Joy of Wisdom*, by Joy Nandy.

When it comes to selecting books to read, I depend a lot on reviews. The internet has made our lives so much easier. Whenever I chance upon an interesting book, I first look up reviews online before I start reading it. I also go through international best seller lists and then decide on a new book. Recommendations from my more literary friends are also always welcome.

Who are your favourite writers?

In fiction, I like the works of Haruki Murakmi. But I mostly read non-fiction, and David Gellner is perhaps one of my favourite writers. Among Nepali writers, I like the works of Karna Shakya. I am also looking forward to reading Bhim Bahadur Pandey’s *Tyas Bakhat ko Nepal*.

What is one book that has inspired you?

The Art of Happiness, by the Dalai Lama. This is one book that has motivated me to read more, do more and live more.

How do you evaluate the present state of the reading culture in Kathmandu?

Definitely. While I was growing up, few people actually read. There was no reading culture, particularly before 1990. With political changes and now with the advent of technology, people are so much more aware and read up on cultures far and wide.

However, despite the many bookstores across the city, and the many book launches that take place and the book discussions and panels that are organised by communities like Martin Chautari, enough critical discussion is not taking place. There is still room for learning.

Pottermania, Anglophilia, and minimal enchantments

Keshava Guha's debut novel, 'Accidental Magic,' attempts to delve into the murky ground between the virtual and the real.

RICHA BHATTARAI

Indian emigrant Kannan has read no other book except his course books—until he chances upon the Harry Potter (HP) series. In the US, the mediocre student’s life becomes entangled with Grimmets, an elderly chat show host with a special love for HP and England. Back in Madras, India, young Malathi scours the city for the latest HP book before organising a quiz for children based on the series. Meanwhile, in Boston, a heartbroken Harvard graduate, Rebecca, turns to HP for solace. At an event, she hears 13-year-old Ezra Miller claiming the HP series is “the most important books of our time.” From just reading the books as a distraction, she eventually seeks permission to enter the HP4BK website—Harry Potter for Big Kids—thus stepping squarely into fandom.

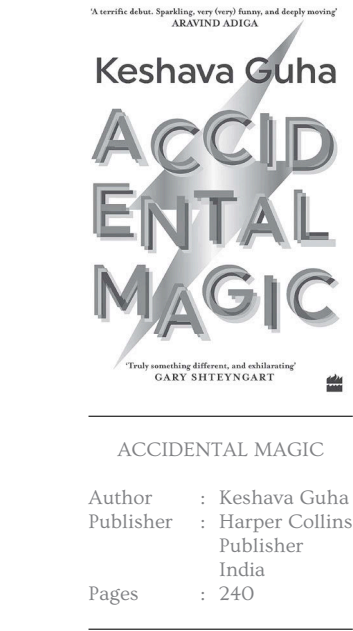
Keshava Guha’s debut novel, *Accidental Magic*, attempts to delve into the murky ground between the virtual and the real, literary and literal, the mind in solitude and its transformation within a clique. For a work of art that circumnates the fantasy world created by the seven-part HP series (of which only four are published at the time the book is set), the novel (and/or its characters) displays practical and quite routine objectives: (a) To establish HP as the great literature of our time; (b) To debate the pros and cons of fan fiction; (c) To dissect friendships and relationships built around HP; (d) To take forward the Harry/Hermione (H/H) ship; (e) To explore ways to sneakily integrate HP in every life around the earth; (f) To examine and analyse Anglophilia, particularly in the context of the Indian who was previously oppressed by the British, but in an example of Stockholm syndrome, seems obsessed with the race, their productions, and the country; and (g) To demonstrate a love-hate relationship with Harvard and all that the Ivy League stands for.

To base an entire novel on minute details and spin-offs of Harry Potter to non-Harry Potter readers is a risk.

An interesting start for a thesis or HP 101, certainly, but a novel? The story runs away with itself. It’s quite bizarre and wild and inexplicable—to be lauded for its fresh approach, but eventually a botched experiment. *Accidental Magic* defies description, which could be an absolute brownie point for a novel, but here it works in the opposite way. The writer commands his words to his will, the novel itself is perceptive and overflowing with knowledge of the human mind in the .com era, yet it does not all come together as a seamless whole.

To base an entire novel on minute details and spin-offs of HP, a kind of breathless and adolescent exaltation that can be dense and incomprehensible to non-HP readers, is a risk. While the author has mentioned time and again that reading (or not reading) HP has nothing to do with the novel, it does have everything to do with the novel. You cannot choose a setting for your work of literature, and then deny its overbearing strands hanging from every corner. For ardent HP-lovers, especially, the work is a puzzle, wrapped up so deeply and completely in its clubs and bonding that a reader may scarcely peep in. Just like Rebecca doesn’t quite ‘get’ Kannan, it is quite a task to ‘get’ this book.

It is easy to love the novel when it starts out. Nostalgia hits you hard, even if you weren’t a 70s kid growing up in India. “Back in Bangalore, in the last year at engineering college, it had been Kannan’s habit of bunking class on Friday with his friends Vinay and Ashok in favour of a morning show at the cinema, Tamil or Hindi if they had to, but ideally Hollywood, and to lunch at the Tao Fu Bar and Restaurant, consisting of Chicken Manchurian and rum or whisky with Pepsi, at retail price.” Kannan is a knock-off version of his brother Santhanam (now Santa C. Nam), the imitation “as



pitiful as a low-budget Tamil remake of a Hollywood action film.” Endearing as this is, it is quite a challenge for a novel on a migrating Indian to be different—loss, attachment, unbelonging, forgetting, embracing—so much has already been discussed these last many decades.

The novel veers off the emotional path by introducing something quite new—a friendship that starts with a mutual love for Harry Potter, such a telling story of our time. A young adult tumbling precariously into manhood and an eccentric radio presenter old enough to be his father bond over a HP purchase, creating a background for what could be an exciting examination of literary relationships. Alas, it never arrives, instead ending with characters vying to lay themselves at the feet of Kannan. Kannan, whose growth arc does not deserve any of this, who has to be one of the most irritation-inducing and ungrateful characters to exist, who displays no agency except penning a few lines over a relationship in HP. In fact, none of the characters draw you to them except for Malathi, a warm and sensible presence who suffers from the hands of the thoughtless (troubled, some might see him as) Kannan.

There are issues embedded deep into the novel that are certainly on the minds of many, many people: how lonely we are in the midst of a burgeoning crowd, how our virtual friendships rarely translate into fulfilling relationships, how the real and the virtual are so mixed up in our minds we lose context. But there is little coherence or clarity in dealing with any of these. The novel ends up being too preppy, too niche, overflowing with literary references and inside ‘philosophies.’ Rebecca’s father, a professor, treats her thus: “When, as a freshman, she had threatened to concentrate in social anthropology, he sent her a paper by Martha Nussbaum denouncing cultural relativism. The news that she was dating a final-club jock was met with a selection from Heloise’s letters to Abelard, and her decision to join IvyEdge by Marx’s Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 and On the Jewish Question.” The same father also treats us to a sudden and irrelevant sermon on menstrual syncing. We get it, it’s a satire on the extremely pedantic, but it is still quite unnecessary to the plot.

There is also a constant need to validate Harry Potter and ‘protect’ its reads – comparing it to Shakespeare’s work and justifying its ‘mystery’ when Harold Bloom disses it for not being ‘a literary genius in the classical sense.’ This novel, it must be repeated, is not a thesis on the virtues of the HP series, nor need a novel, at regular intervals, harp on the wonderful world created by the HP’s fan fiction.

This is a novel that happens completely in the author’s mind (like all works of fiction), perhaps gives the author a great deal of pleasure for being able to get the HP theme off his chest, but is unable to translate the idea into the actual pages (unlike the lively, enchanting and refreshing fiction it could be).

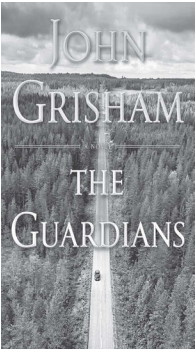


POST PHOTO: ELITE JOSHI

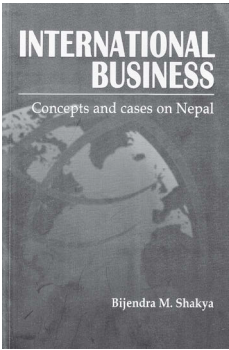
BEST-SELLERS | NEW RELEASES

Fiction

1. A Wonder Books of Girls and Boys by Nathaniel Hawthorne
2. The Golden House by Salman Rushdie
3. The Guardians by John Grisham
4. Raavan by AmishTripathi
5. The Fragile Thread of Hope by Pankaj Giri

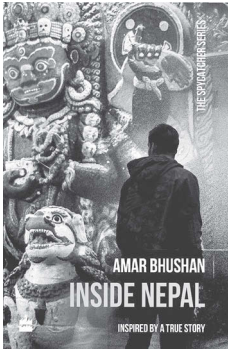


Source: Mandala Book Point



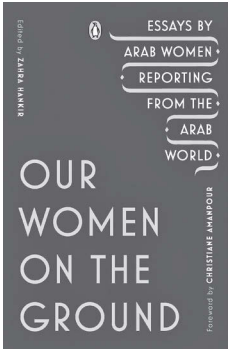
International Business: Concepts and cases on Nepal
Author: Bijendra M Shakya
Publisher: Ratna Pustak Bhandar
Price: Rs 495

Designed to meet the courses for both undergraduate and post-graduate studies in business management, the book consists basic theories and concepts on international business with a combination of contemporary issues. It also includes cases that have application to Nepal’s trade.



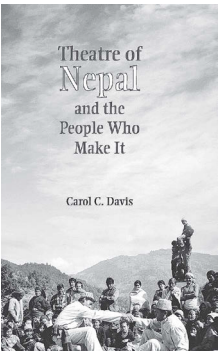
Inside Nepal
Author: Amar Bhushan
Publisher: HarperCollins
Price: Rs 560

In *Inside Nepal*, Jeevnathan, head of the Eastern Service Bureau (ESB) of India’s external intelligence agency, has been charged by the Agency’s headquarters with overseeing the closure of the Bureau. In the shadowy world of intelligence operations, the line between right and wrong, good and bad can often become blurred.



Our Women on the Ground
Author: Zahra Hankir
Publisher: Penguin Book
Price: Rs 1118

Nineteen Arab women journalists speak out about what it’s like to report on their changing homelands in this first-of-its-kind essay collection. Their daring and heartfelt stories shatter stereotypes about the region’s women and provides a perspective on a part of the world that is frequently misunderstood.



Non-Fiction

1. Theatre of Nepal by Carol C Davis
2. From Secretary to CEO by Carly Florina
3. Outgrowing God by Richard Dawkins
4. The Nepal Nexus by Sudheer Sharma
5. Unleashing the Vajra by SujeevShakya

Need to take the virus more seriously: WHO

The World Health Organization warned that a many of countries were not showing political commitment needed to “match the level of the threat we all face”.

LAURENT THOMET
BEIJING

World health officials have warned that countries are not taking the coronavirus crisis seriously enough, as outbreaks surged across Europe and in the United States where medical workers sounded warnings over a “disturbing” lack of hospital preparedness.

Global markets tumbled again over concerns about the impact on the economy and as countries took more drastic steps to prevent contagion of a disease that has killed more than 3,300 people and infected nearly 100,000 in about 85 nations.

Cases soared in Italy, France, Greece and Iran, while a cruise ship was held off the Californian coast to test passengers showing symptoms of the disease—echoing a harrowing episode in Japan several weeks ago that saw hundreds infected on a luxury liner.

The epidemic has wreaked havoc on international business, tourism, sports events and schools, with almost 300 million students sent home worldwide.

Even religion is affected: The Vatican said Pope Francis may change his schedule, Bethlehem was placed under lockdown, and Saudi Arabia emptied Islam’s holiest site in Mecca to sterilise it.

Fears about the economic fallout caused stock markets in Asia to sink on Friday.

China—where the virus emerged late last year—still accounts for the majority of cases and deaths, but infections are now rising faster abroad, with South Korea, Iran and Italy major hotspots.

The World Health Organization



Medical staff wearing protective suits prepare to evacuate Indonesian crew members from Diamond Princess cruise ship, in Kertajati Airport, Majalengka, Indonesia.

REUTERS

warned Thursday that a “long list” of countries were not showing political commitment needed to “match the level of the threat we all face”.

“This is not a drill,” WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters, calling for “aggressive preparedness”.

“This is not a time to give up. This is not a time for excuses,” he said.

“This is a time for pulling out all the stops.”

In the United States, the largest nursing union said a survey of thousands of nurses at hospitals showed “truly disturbing” results.

“They show that a large per-

centage of our nation’s hospitals are unprepared to safely handle COVID-19,” said Jane Thomason, a hygiene specialist with the union.

Nurses are working without necessary personal protective equipment and lack education and training for handling the disease, said National Nurses United director Bonnie Castillo.

Emergency spending

The US Congress passed an emergency \$8.3 billion spending bill to combat the coronavirus Thursday as cases surged in the country’s northwest and deaths reached 12.

More than 180 people are infect-

Donald Trump dismissed WHO’s report claiming it was false.

ed in the US. But President Donald Trump has downplayed the risk, saying the WHO’s report of a 3.4 percent mortality rate was “false”.

Admiral Brett Giroir, the assistant secretary of health, estimated the death rate at “somewhere between 0.1 percent and

one percent”—closer to the seasonal flu—due to a high number of unreported cases.

A helicopter dropped test kits on the deck of the Grand Princess cruise ship off the coast of San Francisco to determine if any of the nearly 3,500 guests and crew had contracted the new coronavirus.

Health officials sounded the alarm after two passengers who had been on board during a previous voyage later fell ill, and one of them died.

The ship belongs to Princess Cruises, the company that operated a coronavirus-stricken vessel held off Japan last month from

which more than 700 people tested positive and six died.

China imports cases

Cases in China have gradually fallen as tens of millions of people remain under strict quarantine to contain the virus, which first emerged in the central city of Wuhan in December.

But fresh infections increased for a second consecutive day on Friday, with 143 new patients, and the number of imported cases from abroad to 36.

China’s death toll rose to 3,042, with over 80,500 infections.

Anger at the government’s handling of the epidemic has not waned in Wuhan, as videos circulated of residents haranguing an official touring an apartment complex. According to Chinese media, the outcry was against the community’s property management, who were allegedly only pretending to have volunteers deliver food to inhabitants in the locked down towers.

Other countries are facing a growing epidemic.

South Korea has the second biggest number of cases outside China, with over 6,000 infections and 42 deaths, prompting the country to extend school breaks by three weeks.

Japan imposed a quarantine on arrivals from South Korea and China, angering Seoul which summoned the Japanese ambassador to protest the “irrational” move.

Italy, which has the biggest outbreak in Europe, has ordered schools and universities shut until March 15, and on Thursday reported a sharp rise in deaths, bringing the total to 148.

France also reported a steep jump in cases, bringing its total to 423 with seven deaths.

—Agence-France Presse

Critics of India’s Modi government face sedition charges

Official data reveal as many as 332 people were arrested under the sedition law between 2016 and 2018.

SHEIKH SAALIQ
NEW DELHI

Sharjeel Imam was a little-known research scholar and a student activist until Indian police launched a manhunt across five states to nab him for a protest speech he gave calling for a month-long road blockade in the county’s northeast.

“Create debris on the railway tracks and roads,” Imam told the crowd, exhorting them to cut off the northeastern state of Assam from the rest of the country.

Massive protests had broken out in Assam and elsewhere in India in December after a law was passed that fast-tracks naturalization for some religious minorities who immigrated illegally from some neighbouring countries but excludes Muslims.

In the wake of his speech, some leaders of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party labelled Imam a “secessionist.” A lawmaker from Modi’s party said that people like him “should be shot dead publicly.”

In January, the 31-year-old was arrested and charged as an enemy of India under a British colonial-era sedition law. Modi’s government has increasingly brandished the law to silence critics, intellectuals, human rights activists, filmmakers, students and journalists, with police arguing that words or actions of dissent make them a threat to national security.

Official data reveal as many as 332 people were arrested under the sedition law between 2016 and 2018, though only seven were convicted, suggesting that police have struggled to gather evidence against the accused.

Nevertheless, India’s notoriously slow criminal justice system ensures that the movement and speech of the accused are severely hamstrung as long as cases remain pending. While charged, people can’t obtain passports or government jobs, and must show up to court as required.

“The real punishment is in the trial where a person has to spend days, sometimes even months, to try and prove innocence,” said Chitranshu Sinha, an Indian lawyer who has written a book on the history of the sedition law.

“This is enough to harass or silence people,” he said, calling it an “oppressive, black law.”

In the case of Imam, India’s burgeoning pro-government news channels were quick to paint him as a raging Islamist who was out to destroy the country.

“The law is used to label dissenting citizens as disloyal toward their country through media trials instead of legal processes,” said Ayesha Pattnaik, a researcher who has analysed India’s sedition law, brought in and used by the British to repress India’s freedom fighters before its independence in 1947.

The government only began collecting data on the number of sedition cases in 2015, but researchers and other experts say there has been an increase in its use under the Modi government. Last month when Modi’s law minister, Ravi Shankar Prasad, was asked if India was becoming less tolerant of the free expression of dissent, he told reporters that use of the sedition law to silence dissent would be an “abuse of power.”

Prasad said people have the right to criticize Modi, his party and the government but the law was needed because there were “forces in the country out to



Indians hold placards and shout slogans during a protest against the sedition case filed by police against a school after a play performed by students denouncing a new citizenship law.

AP/RSS

weaken India.”

Government spokesman Kuldeep Dhatwalia declined to comment on accusations that the law is being used to target critics.

India’s sedition law, like its equivalent in other former British-ruled countries, offers a legal framework to categorize a citizen as a threat to the state. Globally, it is increasingly viewed as a draconian law and was revoked in the United Kingdom in 2010. Its use to silence critics in India isn’t new. During previous governments, people were charged with sedition for liking a Facebook post critical of the administration, criticizing a yoga guru, cheering a rival cricket team, drawing political cartoons, and not standing up in a movie theatre for the national anthem, which is often played before films.

But under Modi, critics say, India is growing notoriously intolerant, its crackdown on critics unprecedented in scale.

Last year, Indian police filed a case of sedition

against 49 people, including well-known movie stars, for writing an open letter to Modi expressing concerns over hate crimes targeting minority communities. After public outcry, the charges were dropped.

More recently, police investigated those involved in a school play that voiced opposition to the citizenship law and arrested a primary school teacher and the mother of a student for sedition. The students, aged 9 and 10, were interrogated by police over several days for participating in the play. The charges were later dropped. Leaders of Modi’s party routinely label critics as “anti-national.” The government has rejected demands from civil society and opposition to repeal the law, which carries a maximum penalty of life in prison.

Last summer, New Delhi police filed a sedition case against political activist Shehla Rashid for tweets that alleged the Indian army tortured people in disputed Kashmir days after India revoked the region’s semi-autonomy and put the Muslim-majority region

under lockdown. Shehla alleged that Indian soldiers tortured four Kashmiri men while placing a microphone next to them “so that the entire area could hear them scream, and be terrorized.”

The Indian army refuted the allegations. A criminal complaint followed seeking Shehla’s arrest on the grounds that she had spread fake information against the government and the army.

Shehla said the allegations of torture were proved true after reports of army abuse were published in the independent media, including The Associated Press.

Still, for months, she has been legally tackling the case that left her with “considerable financial implications” and had, what she calls, “chilling effects on her freedom of speech.”

“The cost of speaking up in this country is a lot,” said Shehla. “You are effectively criminalized the moment you speak up against the government.”

—Associated Press.

