



# THE KATHMANDU POST

WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

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34.7°C 1.8°C  
Dhangadi Jumla



This aerial picture shows an empty street at Ravibhawan in Kathmandu on Saturday, the 12th day of a nationwide lockdown over coronavirus fears.

## With local infection, time to prevent mass outbreak is running out, health experts say

As Nepal enters stage 2 of pandemic, Saturday's three new cases bring the total number of people confirmed to have been infected with Covid-19 in the country to nine.

ARJUN POUDEL  
KATHMANDU, APRIL 4

The Health Ministry on Saturday confirmed three more cases of Covid-19, taking the total number of coronavirus cases identified in the country to nine.

According to the ministry, the three patients are a 21-year-old man from Kailali who had recently returned from Mumbai; a 41-year-old man from Kanchanpur who returned from Uttarakhand of India; and a 34-year-old woman from Kailali, a relative of a person who had earlier tested positive for the disease.

According to an official at the Sudurpaschim Provincial Health Directorate, the 34-year-old woman is the sister-in-law of the 34-year-old man who had returned from the United Arab Emirates and tested positive for Covid-19. This marks the first instance of the local transmission of the disease, said the Health Ministry.

With local transmission, Nepal has now officially entered stage 2 of the pandemic, which public health experts call "a very disturbing and dangerous" phase that they hoped Nepal would not enter.

"The one case of local transmission could be the tiniest piece of the tip of the iceberg," Dr Baburam Marasini, former director of the Epidemiology and Disease Control Division, told the Post. "The window is rapidly closing. It will be impossible to control simultaneous outbreaks in many places. Thousands of people from countries with outbreaks have returned to Nepal and some infected people might definitely have already passed the coronavirus to others."

Before Nepal went into a lockdown, cancelling all international flights and closing the border, thousands of Nepalis, and even some foreigners, had continued to enter Nepal from



POST PHOTO: ELITE JOSHI

Public health experts say the country is not adequately prepared to fight the pandemic.

countries with active Covid-19 cases. Most of them were not placed in quarantine and doctors do not believe that a majority are quarantining themselves.

"If we fail to contain this stage, we will enter the third stage—community transmission—which will be devastating," said Marasini. "Then the situation enters an epidemic stage, in which transmission gets out of control and the disease has no clear end."

The World Health Organization has been urging countries around the globe to isolate, treat and trace, while testing all suspects, especially those who've returned from abroad.

The government, however, has not been carrying out enough tests, say doctors. Many who have visited the Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital in Teku looking for tests have been turned away for not presenting enough symptoms. So far, according to the Health Ministry, 1,521 tests have been carried out, a minuscule number in a country of 30 million people. Doctors at the hospital themselves believe that more tests need to be carried but they are tied down by the government's instructions.

>>> Continued on page 4

## President Bhandari addresses the nation but many are saying it should have been Prime Minister Oli

Friday's address to nation was not just sudden but also defensive of the government, raising suspicions behind its intent.

ANIL GIRI

KATHMANDU, APRIL 4

President Bidya Devi Bhandari on Friday evening made a sudden address to the nation, saying that the coronavirus could not spread in Nepal because of the government's strong policies and preparations.

A day later, the Health Ministry confirmed three new cases of Covid-19, including one local transmission, marking stage 2 of the pandemic.

At a time when the KP Sharma Oli administration is being widely criti-



POST FILE PHOTO

cised for a series of controversies, Bhandari defended the government, leading many to question her intent of

addressing the nation at such a crisis.

In such a time of crisis, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, not President Bhandari, should address the public, say leaders and experts.

Opposition leaders and experts on constitutional affairs said it was a mistake on part of the constitutional head of state to remark on a disease that the government has failed to deal with. According to them, an address regarding a public health issue like Covid-19 should have come from either the prime minister, the health minister or someone directly involved in

dealing with the matter, like Defence Minister Ishwar Pokhrel, who heads the Covid-19 control committee.

"These are difficult times and in such situations, the prime minister should have been the appropriate person to inform the people about the government's efforts and its initiatives to deal with the pandemic," said Vijay Kanta Lal Karni, an associate professor of political science and a former ambassador. "A constitutional head of state defending the government is a wrong practice."

>>> Continued on page 4

## Oli government's fiascos provide opportunity for rival factions to pounce

Madhav Nepal and Pushpa Kamal Dahal factions of the ruling party have seized the moment to criticise Oli's handling of the Covid-19 crisis, party insiders say.

TIKA R PRADHAN  
KATHMANDU, APRIL 4

A series of rash actions by the government—and those closely associated with it—has not just invited criticism about the governance of Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli but also brought to light once again the cracks within the ruling Nepal Communist Party.

The recent fiasco over the procurement of medical equipment from China provided an opportunity for many of Oli's detractors from within the party to take aim at the prime minister and his Cabinet, with leaders from the Madhav Nepal faction vehemently criticising the government and its actions.

"Madhav Nepal was expressing serious concerns over the ongoing activities of the govern-

ment," said Dilu Panta, a central committee member. "He said our party was currently going through a very difficult situation. Party leaders are unaware of how the prime minister is working." Due to the lockdown, party leaders have refrained from moving out from their homes but they are discussing the government's move via telephone. "I think leaders are thinking of some moves to press the government," Panta said.

Bishnu Rijal, a central committee member who has close relations with Madhav Kumar Nepal, has appeared vocal over the last few days and he took to social media to criticise the Oli administration on various fronts—be it the medical equipment purchase responsibility to the Army or Nepalis stuck at the border.

>>> Continued on page 4

### How does the coronavirus spread?

The virus is spread through droplets. It can be transmitted into the air from coughing or sneezing, which people nearby can get through their nose, mouth or eyes. It can also transmit to people from a coronavirus-infected person through handshakes, or through some objects like pen, door knobs and stair bannisters touched by a person infected with the virus.

### General Symptoms

Dry Cough

Fever

Shortness of Breath

Headache

Confusion

Sore Throat

### 6 Preventive measures

1. Wash your hands thoroughly

Wash your hands with soap and water thoroughly at least for 20 seconds after touching a suspected contaminated surface.

2. Cover your mouth

Cover your mouth with masks while coughing or while being with someone who is coughing. Avoid reusing masks. Change it constantly. Discard your masks properly in a dustbin.

3. Avoid sharing/ using personal items

Don't share your personal items like pens, mouse and digital devices and avoid using those used by others.

4. Avoid touching your eyes, ears and nose

The virus can enter your body easily when you touch your eyes, ears and nose quite often, as it usually can remain in these places for a longer period of time.

5. Avoid crowds

Don't be at big gatherings as much as possible. Since the possibility of virus transmission from one person to another is so high, crowds should be avoided as much as possible.

6. Don't hesitate to seek medical advice

If you have a fever or flu-like symptoms, immediately consult your doctor. Seek medical advice and follow your doctor's advice.

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NATIONAL

# Quarantine centre set up by Province 2 government in Dhanusha lacks basic facilities

The facility does not have a running water supply or enough soaps, say health workers.

**AJIT TIWARI**  
JANAKPUR, APRIL 4

The 250-bed quarantine facility set up by Nepali Army at Ganguli in Dhanusha currently has 19 people, all of them returnees from India and Qatar.

But the facility, set up at the behest of the Province 2 government, is ill-equipped to function effectively, says Ashok Thakur, a health assistant deployed at the facility. According to Thakur, the place lacks even the basic facilities like running water and soap.

“We are living in tents. We don’t have any protective gear and the medical equipment to conduct health check-ups of the quarantined patients. The only protection we have are face masks, that’s all,” he said.

There are 11 health workers, 14 Nepal Army soldiers, one Assistant Sub Inspector from Nepal Police and one Assistant Sub Inspector from Armed Police Force deployed at the facility. None of them has personal protective equipment.

“There’s no management of health and safety at the facility. We have been put on duty to save lives but we can only do so if we can protect ourselves first,” said one security personnel from Nepal Army.

On Friday morning, a team led by Gopal Regmi, chief executive officer of Janakpudham Sub Metropolis, inspected the facility and assured to provide water supply, soaps and sanitisers. “There’s a shortage of face masks. There are no buckets, soaps



The 250-bed quarantine facility set up by Nepali Army at Ganguli in Dhanusha.

and hand sanitisers here,” Regmi said. “The Sub Metropolis will immediately take steps to manage these items.”

The Nepal Army has been providing meals to the quarantined people.

Captain Subid Basnet said the soldiers deployed at the facility were at risk because they did not have any protective gear.

“The soldiers who are feeding the people in quarantine don’t have Personal Protective Equipment. They have to go near the quarantined people but have nothing to protect them from the possible infection,” he said.

The people staying in quarantine, too, are not pleased with the management, or lack thereof, of the facility.

“It doesn’t feel safe here. There’s not enough water in the taps to wash our hands. I feel my health is more compromised here than it would be if I was staying at my own house,” said a 34-year-old quarantine patient. “There’s no internet, no TV, no books and papers. It’s difficult to spend time.”

POST PHOTO: AJIT TIWARI

# Timber smugglers entering forests during lockdown

**NARAYAN SHARMA**  
NAWALPARASI, APRIL 4

Timber smugglers were found felling trees in several community forests in Nawalparasi (East) taking advantage of the lockdown, Division Forest Office in Kawasoti has said.

According to the forest office, as many as 65 trees (nearly 200 cubic feet) in Bulingtar and Gaidakot areas were chopped down by timber smugglers in the past couple of days.

On Saturday, the local people of Maddanda in Bulingtar Rural Municipality recovered 62 logs of Sal trees.

“As many as 37 trees, mostly Sal, were cut down in the forest of Maddanda,” said Chandra Bahadur Lungeli, a local. The villagers immediately informed the forest office after they discovered the logs on a roadside. Officials believe that the trees were felled on Friday night.

The forest office has deployed a team led by a ranger to the site for investigation.

Maddanda is located on a hilly terrain around 35 km north from Kawasoti.

Timber smugglers have also felled 28 trees in a community forest in Aahale at ward No 17 of Gaidakot Municipality a few days ago.

“A team of forest officers and guards have been deployed to the area to investigate the matter,” Shiva Shrestha, information officer at the forest office, said.

According to Shrestha, timber smugglers are cutting down trees taking advantage of poor security situation and absence of people’s movement in forest areas amid the lockdown enforced to stop the spread of coronavirus.

Earlier on March 26, a group of timber smugglers had attempted to cut down trees in Jyoti Community Forest in Gaidakot Municipality. But they fled when a local forest team reached the site.

The forest team recovered two logs, a motorcycle and two sawing tools left behind by the loggers.

# Temporary quarantine facility built on no-man’s land to keep stranded Nepalis

**RUPA GAHATRAJ** IN NEPALGUNJ & **NARAYAN SHARMA** IN NAWALPARASI  
APRIL 4

More than 180 Nepali returnees from India who were trying to enter Nepal through Nepalgunj are being kept in a temporary quarantine facility set up in the no man’s land in Nepalgunj Thursday onwards.

Officials of both the countries reached the decision to facilitate the stranded Nepali nationals in the no man’s land since they refused to move from the area and stay at a quarantine facility in India.

“We have been through a lot in the last few days,” said Raju Sunar, one of the stranded people who was on his way back to Surkhet from India. “We didn’t want to move from the border and go back to India. I’d rather stay here than in a foreign country in these difficult times.”

Guman Gharti, one of the stranded, was happy with the authorities’ decision.

“It’s such a relief,” said Gharti. “I was worried about being sent to India.”

According to Guman, they had started their journey home from India five days ago. They have been staying at the no man’s land since Monday evening, after Nepali authorities barred them from entering the country.

The returnees were allowed to cross the Indian checkpoint at Rupaidiha by Indian security forces on Monday evening, but were denied entry to Nepal. Nepali authorities had asked them to go back to India where the Indian authorities would make necessary arrangements for them to be quarantined.

“We tried to persuade them to go to a quarantine facility on the Indian side of the border, but they refused,” said Superintendent of Police Bir Bahadur Oli, head of Banke Police.

Nine Nepali nationals that included disabled, women and children were allowed to enter the country and were kept in quarantine at Mahendra Multiple Campus two days ago follow-

ing the request of Nepalgunj Sub Metropolitan City, said Oli.

“We had no other option but to quarantine the rest in the no man’s land,” said Kumar Bahadur Khadka, the chief administrative officer of Banke. “We feel for them, but we have to follow the government’s order.”

Food to the stranded will be provided by the Nepalgunj Submetropolis for as long as they stay in the temporary quarantine facility, according to Oli.

“They will be quarantined for 14 days,” said Oli. “Personnel from the Nepal Police and Armed Police Force will be deployed for their security.”

The Nepal Army has set up 45 tents as a temporary quarantine facility in the no man’s land.

Meanwhile, 24 Nepali nationals who had gone for medical treatment to Valmiki Nagar in Bihar, India, have also been left stranded and are waiting to come back home.

Bhaktiram Dotel, who is from Bhupal and is currently staying on a hospital’s premises, said that two dozen Nepalis have been stuck in Valmiki Nagar since March 25, the day India enforced the lockdown.

“I came to the hospital for a check-up but was not able to return to Nepal after India announced a 21-day lockdown,” Dotel told the Post over the phone.

Dharmagat Dhakal, a sub Inspector at Tribeni Police Post at Binayi Tribeni Rural Municipality Ward No. 6 in Nawalparasi (East), said, “We have been informed that 24 Nepalis are stuck at a hospital in Bihar, India. None of them has called us yet.”

According to Dotel, the authorities have not made any arrangements for their stay in India or made any efforts to bring them back to Nepal. “We are living in difficult circumstances. Nobody has come forward to help us.”

Dhakal says that given the lockdown, authorities cannot do much to help the stranded Nepalis in Valmiki Nagar.

“We have informed the Home Ministry about the situation,” he said. “There is not much we can do about it.”

# Oli government’s fiascos ...

>>> Continued from page 1

Defence Minister Ishwar Pokhrel, who also leads the high-level coordination committee to control Covid-19, and Health Minister Bhanubhakta Dhakal have both been pulled into a controversy over the procurement of medical equipment, the tender for which was given to a private company under suspicious circumstances. After widespread criticism, from both the party and the public, regarding the procurement process and the quality of the equipment purchased, the tender was annulled.

But the issue did not rest there. After an online news outlet, kathmandupress.com, reported on the involvement of the sons of Pokhrel and Oli’s Chief Advisor Bishnu Rimal, and the prime minister’s IT consultant Asgar Ali, the article was taken down by the website’s developers, acting on behalf of Ali, kathmandupress.com alleged.

Ramesh Bista, general-secretary of the Federation of Nepali Journalists, had issued a statement on the organisation’s behalf, condemning the action as an attack on press freedom. The statement—which was reportedly issued in consultation with Nepal Communist Party (NCP) Chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal, according to Ganesh Basnet, a journalist affiliated with the ruling party—invited a phone call from Oli’s press advisor, Surya Thapa, who allegedly “threatened” Bista.

Many party leaders believe that Dahal too has seized on the ongoing scandal to score points against his co-chair, “Oli is under attack from all quarters of the party over the last one and a half years and that has been expedited at this time of crisis,” said Khagaraj Adhikari, a lawmaker and former minister close to Oli.

After the annulment of the original tender, the government has now authorised the Nepal Army to carry out a government-to-government procurement deal for medical supplies, another decision that has been widely criticised for the Army’s opacity in procurement matters and questions over whether procurement falls in the national defence force’s mandate. Ruling party leaders, including

Surendra Pandey, Pampha Bhusal and Mani Thapa, have publicly criticised the decision. Even Oli’s Cabinet members have taken umbrage at the decisions, alleging that they were kept in the dark. At least three ministers that the Post spoke to say that they were unaware of Oli’s decision.

“We cannot allow the Army to be involved in purchasing medical supplies,” said one of the ministers on condition of anonymity.

Kantipur, the Post’s sister paper, reported on Friday that a March 29 Cabinet meeting did not discuss the plan to hand over the responsibility of procuring medical supplies to the Army. A decision to that effect, however, was inserted in the minutes later by the chief secretary at Oli’s behest, hence even ministers were unaware of it, the paper said.

Party factions opposed to Oli have been quick to seize on the government’s mistakes, but their increasing activities also have to do with the fact that Oli has largely been absent—from both the government and the party. Since undergoing a kidney transplant on March 4, Oli has been recuperating at his official residence. He has stopped holding meetings and does not venture out, likely due to the fact that he is on immunosuppressants and is at high risk of infection.

But the unfolding scenario, with the government’s lapses in judgment, requires a party meeting, say leaders.

“There are so many issues being raised after the coronavirus pandemic that need to be discussed at a party meeting,” said Surendra Pandey, a standing committee member.

Party spokesperson Narayan Kaji Shrestha too has urged the party leadership to call a meeting of the party secretariat to discuss the government’s controversies.

“Yes, I have demanded a secretariat meeting to both the chairmen comrades. Cabinet and high-level coordination committee meetings are sitting when necessary. In today’s context secretariat can also be held following the health protocol. So I believe the meeting will be held soon, and it must,” Shrestha tweeted on Saturday.

# Police seize ambulances illegally carrying passengers

**SHIVA PURI**  
RAUTAHAT, APRIL 4

The Area Police Office in Chandranigahapur on Saturday confiscated three ambulances that were allegedly carrying passengers along the East West Highway. Of the three ambulances, two are privately owned and one belongs to the Nepal Red Cross Society in Hirapur.

Police confiscated one of the ambulances from the Paurahi section of the highway where it was carrying six passengers, police said. Krishna Lama, the driver, admitted to have carried the passengers from Kathmandu to Harion for Rs 12000, according to the police.

“We have learned that many ambulances have been carrying passengers instead of patients during the lockdown,” DSP Hem Bahadur Shahi of Rautahat police said. “These are sensitive times and taking advantage of this situation is problematic.” The

ambulance, the driver and the passengers are currently in police custody.

In another instance, an ambulance owned by the Red Cross Society was found taking passengers from Barthahwa to Birgunj, Shahi said. The driver, Shivakumar Yadav, has denied misusing the vehicle saying the family he was carrying had an emergency as their child was sick in Birgunj.

The police have confiscated another ambulance that was also carrying passengers from Nawalpur to Birgunj, and has taken its driver, Raj Mohammed Miya, in custody.

“We have noticed a surge of ambulances on the road during the lockdown,” Shahi said.

Meanwhile, Rautahat Police have said they are monitoring the movement of ambulances as many are found to be carrying passengers to make quick money. From now on, ambulances that need to carry patients need to notify the police before being on the road, police said.



POST PHOTO: SHIVA PURI

The Area Police Office in Chandranigahapur impounded three ambulances on Saturday.

# President Bhandari addresses the nation but many are saying it ...

>>> Continued from page 1

But ever since his second kidney transplant on March 4, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli has been recuperating and as per doctors’ advice, he is shunning public meetings, except for occasional Cabinet meetings.

The last time Oli made a public appearance was on March 20, when in a televised address, he talked about the measures the government was taking to contain the spread of the coronavirus. At that time, Nepal had no live Covid-19 cases, with one case that had recovered.

All other decisions with regard to fighting the spread of Covid-19 are being taken by the committee for the prevention and control of Covid-19, headed by Pokhrel. Other related issues, including management of hospitals and isolation wards, are dealt with by the Health Ministry. President Bhandari’s address came

at a time when both Pokhrel and Health Minister Bhanubhakta Dhakal have been drawn into controversy over alleged corruption in procuring medical equipment required to fight Covid-19, leading many to wonder whether the president was prompted to address the nation.

Ruling party insiders said that the Office of the President had been used by the government as a shield against growing criticism from various quarters regarding the government’s lack of preparation and its inability to procure medical equipment.

“In our system, the President plays the role of the guardian. The President is not the patron of the government; she is the patron of the nation and its citizens. Why is the President defending the government?” Minendra Rijal, a lawmaker from the primary opposition Nepali Congress, told the Post.

Last week too, Bhandari had met

with criticism after calling on several ambassadors to “learn about the situation of Nepali citizens in their respective countries”. Many had said that this was not the job of the President, but the foreign minister.

According to Karna, the former diplomat, if the President keeps making such statements on issues that should be dealt with by the executive, there is a danger of a dual regime.

“And that’s not good for democracy,” Karna told the Post.

Some experts on constitutional matters, including those who have served at the Office of the President in the past, said that the head of state should have consulted the major political parties represented in Parliament to learn about the preventive measures being taken. The president could have invited the prime minister, health minister and other officials to take stock of the situation, instead of going

on national television to address the nation, they say.

Law professor Surya Prasad Dhungel, who served as an advisor to former president Ram Baran Yadav, said it appears the government made a request to Bhandari to address the nation, as it was facing criticism for failing to deal with the crisis properly.

“If she had to speak, she should have consulted with major political parties and come up with a common voice in a time of crisis,” Dhungel told the Post. “The address did not make a positive impact on the public. It looked like she was asked to cover up the mismanagement of the government.”

The address did not go down particularly well because the President’s remarks that the government had managed to contain the spread of the disease could not even hold for 24 hours, as more cases were reported the very next day.

But two officials, one former and one serving at the President’s Office, said that Bhandari did a good job and that as the guardian of the constitution and citizens of the country, it’s her duty to speak up in such times of crisis. Sushil Pyakurel, who resigned as the President’s adviser on January 24 after controversy over the appointment of the House Speaker, said that Bhandari’s address on Friday should be seen in the right spirit.

“Since the President is the guardian of the nation, citizens look up to her. The statement made by the President should not be considered as overstepping on her rights and duties provided for by the constitution,” said Pyakurel.

“The President can discuss matters of urgency and other governance issues with the prime minister, ministers and officials. And she can address the nation as well. She has not superseded the executive. The address

should be seen in a positive light.”

Bhesh Raj Adhikari, an aide to President Bhandari, also defended the address, saying the head of state wanted to convey a message to the people in good faith.

“She had no intention of playing politics, especially in such a time of crisis,” Adhikari told the Post. “But it’s a fact that there is internal conflict in the ruling party and some elements are making unwarranted efforts to drag the Office of the President into controversy.”

According to Adhikari, there was nothing wrong with the President expressing concern at a time of crisis.

“It’s also the duty of the head of state to communicate with the people,” he said. “The Office of the President has not breached any constitutional mandate by calling on the Nepali people and the government to work together to fight the disease.”















