

# THE KATHMANDU POST

Nepal's largest selling English daily

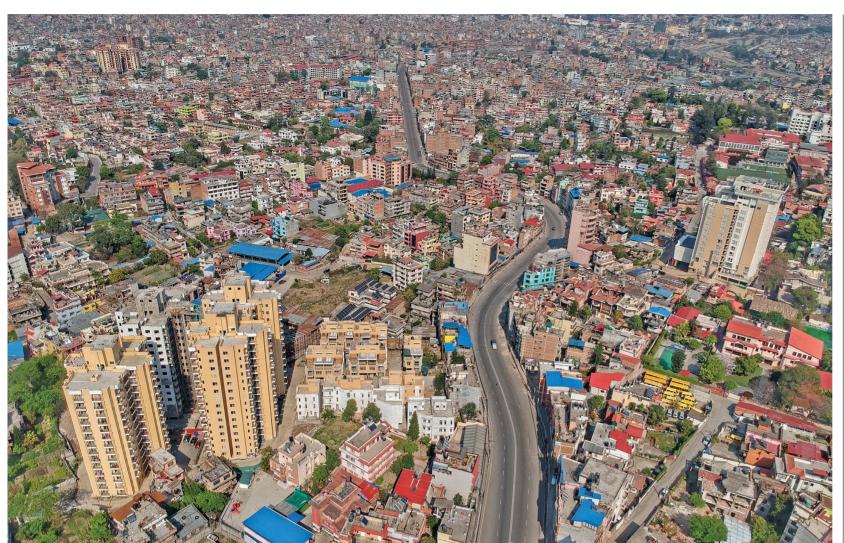
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34.7° C 1.8° C





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.

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

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-yearold 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



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 them-

"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 miniscule 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

KMG

### 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** 

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 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-



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 Karna, 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

Madhay 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 ithas 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 government," 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, leaders 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 mediequipment 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.

**Preventive** measures

1.

4.

Wash your

thoroughly

Wash your hands with soap

and water thoroughly at least for 20 seconds after

touching a suspected

contaminated surface

**Avoid touching** 

your eyes, ears

The virus can enter your

body easily when you touch your eyes, ears and

these places for a longer

nose quite often, as it

usually can remain in

and nose

period of time

hands









**Cover your** mouth

5.

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.



**Dry Cough** 

Headache

**Avoid** crowds

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.

Don't be at big



Avoid sharing/ using personal items

Shortness

of Breath

**Sore Throat** 

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

**General Symptoms** 

Fever

Confusion



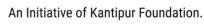
6. Don't hesitate to seek

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









#### **MEDLEY**

#### Inside the Post

#### **National**

The much-awaited Melamchi Water Supply Project is bracing for yet another delay as the ongoing lockdown in light of the Covid-19 pandemic has affected work at the site. The project was on course to meeting the mid-July deadline.

Commercial banks are exchanging less foreign currency with the central bank as the Covid-19 outbreak bites into cash inflows. Banks sell their excess foreign exchange to Nepal Rastra Bank on a daily basis which normally amounts to \$20-40

The number of confirmed new coronavirus cases in South Asia neared 6,000 on Saturday, even as authorities in some cities tightened restrictions on movement and warned lockdowns could be extended in a bid to rein in the pandemic.

#### Sports

Tajikistan's domestic football season is kicking off on schedule despite almost every other football league around the globe having ground to a halt due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The clubs in the landlocked Central Asian country of nine million people are largely unknown, even among the world's ardent football fans.

#### **Culture & Arts**

As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to unfold, Nepali colleges and universities are making the switch to virtual classes. However, the effectiveness of virtual classes in Nepal remains questionable.

#### News Quiz

- 1. Which country on Saturday observed three minutes of nationwide silence to mourn those who have died because of
  - coronavirus? a. South Korea
- b. China



- How many Covid-19 cases have been confirmed in Nepal by Saturday?
- In which country were newly born twins named Covid and Corona recently?

- a. India
- b. Pakistan
- c. Bangladesh d. Spain
- 4. In which district, did 24 people leave a quarantine facility citing lack of food and poor accommodation facility recently?
  - a. Kaski
  - b. Khotang c. Rupandehi
  - d. Bhojpur
- What is the revised economic growth rate of Nepal projected by the Asian Development Bank?

a. 5.3 % b. 4.7 %

- c. 3.5 % d. 6.8 %
- 6. Which of the following metropolitan cities has ordered shops selling essentials to display a price list?
  - a. Kathmandu
  - b. Bhaktapur
  - c. Lalitpur d. Bharatpur



A man feeds monkeys at the Pashupati temple area in Kathmandu during the lockdown.

### On this day in history

#### Despite improvement, Nepal's balance of payment is unfavourable

KATHMANDU - After years of being in the black, the balance of payments position during the mid-July to mid-November 1994 period has gone into red. Despite the kingdom's perennial trade deficit, the country's balance of pay-

ment in the past had always been favourable for most of the time. Nepal Rastra Bank which issued the economic data Tuesday, said despite the improvement in receipts from services and transfers, the country's balance of

payment for the first four months showed a deficit of Rs 4,893.6 million. The current accounts balance too showed, as always, a deficit of Rs 3,216.9 million

The Kathmandu Post April 5, 1995

Answers to News Quiz: 1(b), 2(d), 3(a), 4(c), 5(a), 6(c)

### Quote of the day

Oli government's fiascos provide opportunity for rival factions to pounce, Page 1

"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."

> Khagaraj Adhikari, a lawmaker and former minister close to Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, on the difficulty his government is facing.

#### Most read online

#### Australian Prime Minister Morrison asks visa holders to return home

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's statement asking foreign students to go home if they are unable to support themselves in the face of the coronavirus crisis has thousands of Nepali students in the country worried. Talking to journalists in Canberra on Friday, Morrison said his country can only focus on its citizens at the time of a pandemic.

#### Internet slows as Kathmandu residents grounded by the lockdown turn to the web en masse

Kathmandu residents performing their jobs remotely or sitting out the lockdown by watching movies on YouTube have been complaining about slow internet speeds, said Bhoj Raj Bhatta, president of the Internet Service Providers' Association Nepal.

#### Family of man suspected of Covid-19 infection refuses to accept his body alleging hospital of negligence

Six days after the death of Baburam Thapa, who was suspected of Covid-19 infection but later tested negative, his family is yet to collect the body. The family allege the hospital of negligence in Thapa's treatment. Thapa died on Sunday at the makeshift coronavirus-specific hospital in Butwal.

#### Asian Development Bank revises Nepal's economic growth rate to 5.3 percent in light of Covid-19 pandemic

Nepal's economic growth is likely to see a sharp slowdown this fiscal year as the global Covid-19 pandemic cripples business and consumer spending, according to a report released Friday by the Asian Development Bank. In the annual Asian Development Outlook 2020 report, the multilateral funding agency slashed its growth forecast for Nepal to 5.3 percent this fiscal year, which ends mid-July.

#### Corrections

Our reporters and editors do their best to make sure our reporting is free from errors. But when we make mistakes that warrant correction, we will be transparent and clarify at the bottom of the specific article.

If you believe we have got something wrong and it requires correction, please email us at kpost@kmg.com.np with "correction" in the subject line.

For the most recent corrections, visit kathmandupost.com/corrections.

#### HOROSCOPE

#### ARIES (March 21-April 19)

TAURUS (April 20-May 20)



If you're waiting for things to come together with that certain someone, doing something unexpected and forward-thinking could speed things up! Surprise the apple of your eye with a flirtatious text message or heartfelt e-mail. You might not realise it, but the ball is in your court.

An unexpected project could land in your lap,

and it's sure to cause some snags in your plans.

The only way you can minimise the damage is

to tackle this task immediately. With your

unbeatable combination of skill and energy, you

can get everything done ahead of deadline



Right now your brain is wide open to new ideas. Stepping out of your comfort zone has never felt so good, so take a walk on the wild side and remind yourself what it's like to feel a little out of your element! There has never been a better time to explore a new hobby or interest.

If you're trying to impress someone, get their

attention, and don't be shy about sharing stories

from your life, especially if they involve some-

thing you have in common with this person. The

more details you can offer the better. Their role

in your life is surely going to get bigger.



Inspiration could strike today. Enjoy having your curiosity tickled and excited. You're extremely open to new ideas right now, and you're perfectly ready to experience a few new things. Shopping for clothes? Opt for colours and patterns you wouldn't normally go for.

If you feel like you're dancing through the day,

then you're going at the perfect pace! Every

step you take is a step you're taking in the right

rhythm, and you'll be feeling more soulful than

ever once you've taken it. The temptation is out

LIBRA (September 23-October 22)

SCORPIO (October 23-November 21)

there to pick up the pace.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22-December 21)



Today, if you're in any kind of competition, you need to work extra hard to keep your eye on the ball! The prize is yours to lose, so it's more important than ever to believe in yourself. Ignore any psychological games that your opponent might try to play.

CAPRICORN (December 22-January 19)



AQUARIUS (January 20-February 18) There is more on your mind right now than just having a good time. You're in the perfect frame of mind to seek a substantive relationship over a



sizzling affair. Instead of connecting with someone on a physical level, you're ready to engage with their mind.

#### PISCES (February 19-March 20)



#### GEMINI (May 21-June 21)



There is a ton of high energy circulating around you right now, so get ready to have one heck of a great day! You'll be feeding off the good vibes and sending smiles to everyone whether you like them or not. This goodwill won't feel forcedyou'll just be seeing everyone in the best light.



VIRGO (August 23-September 22)

CANCER (June 22-July 22)

LEO (July 23-August 22)

If a friend or loved one is in a bind right now, you need to fight the urge to swoop in and save them like a superhero. It's not that you should abandon someone you care about; it's just that this person needs to figure their own way out of



There's no way that you'll get bored today! Even if your calendar is completely blank, your in-box is empty, and no one else is around, you'll be easily entertained all day long. Going for a long walk, reading a good book, or indulging in a favourite hobby will bring you joy.



You may have been feeling a bit overwhelmed lately, and it's probably because you're pushing yourself way too hard. You need to reset your boundaries and stay within the lines you draw! You have to take care of yourself. Make sure you aren't spreading yourself too thin right now.

#### **CROSSWORD**

#### **ACROSS**

- 5 Feudal worker 9 Tear
- 15 Leonardo da Vinci's "- Lisa"
- 17 Excessively intense
- 18 Classes
- 25 Horse's brake
- 26 Vaudeville dance (hyph.) 30 Crushes grapes
- 35 Lhasa -
- 37 Anticipate, as an arrival
- 39 J.R. attire
- 42 Radio part

- 1 Enjoy a snowy slope
- 12 Not lack 13 Aussie minerals
- 16 Battery chemica
- enthusiasm 19 Lead down the
- garden path 21 Skill
- 23 Part of Batman's garb
- 34 Form 1040 money 8 Pilot experts
- 38 Off-road vehicle 15 Small fish
- 41 Above, to poets
- 44 Minority group 45 Fierce whale 46 Write hurriedly

- 48 Confirmed a bill 50 Not phony 52 Eaves locale 53 Leavings
  - Granola kin 61 — my word! 62 Persona non 64 Caroler's tune
  - Liner sinker 66 Wrestler Hulk -67 Copenhagen
  - 68 So far 69 Puppy cries 70 Mineral springs
    - Fasten a shoe Takes away
  - 5 Partly Clean-air org. South African
  - Actor's quest
  - 10 Cartridge fillers 11 Gridiron option 14 Bank features
  - 20 Musical notes Colossal one
  - 24 Strides along 26 Lots and lots 27 Of the eye

- resident
- **DOWN** Silvery fish
- - compound 31 Austronesian
    - language 32 Slice 33 Fine violin 36 Movie award

47 Giggle

**l**W|R|E|N

29 Fragrant

- 39 Plied a needle 40 Hassocks 43 Courageousness
- 45 Causes affront

- PREVIOUS PUZZLE SOLVED
- ALLAS SCUBA OMNI MILLPOND DOWNLOAD ZINGMMAVENMODIE SLEEPERS I A M A R C H
- 28 Like better

EASED

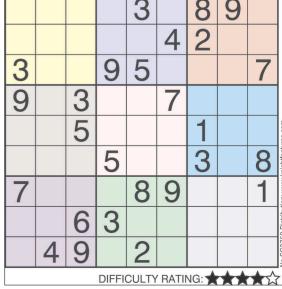
- 49 Promise to pay 51 Composer Anderson 53 Rich red
- 55 Arrange 56 Heroic tale
- 58 Ivory or Dove 59 "Stormy Weather" singer
- Triangular fencing sword - Horne 60 Henri's aits 63 Water source

### 16 27 **l**29 32 33 35 38 58 59 62 65 66 70

### **SUDOKU**

4 9 3 1 5 7 2 8 6 16842937 82763914 264978513 958361472 3 1 5 2 4 8 6 9 1 7 9 2 8 6 3 5 4 3 4 2 7 1 5 6 9 8 685493721

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION



#### **NATIONAL**

## Government to carry out rapid Covid-19 tests in Kanchanpur, Kailali and Baglung

The decision was taken after four people from the three districts tested positive for the disease.

**POST REPORT** 

Γhe government has decided to launch large-scale rapid diagnostic tests in three districts where Covid-19 cases

have been confirmed. The decision, according to finance and communication Minister Yubaraj Khatiwada, who is also the government spokesperson, was taken on Saturday as four people from Baglung, Kanchanpur and Kailali tested positive for Covid-19 in the last three days.

#### Out of nine positive cases, half of them have been reported in Sudurpaschim.

"We want to ensure that all those who have come in contact with Covid-19 patients are tested for the virus, said Khatiwada while making public the Cabinet's decisions on the stateowned Nepal Television. "The government will make all necessary arrange ments for the tests.

The government decision comes as public health experts said large-scale testing was the only way to mitigate the risk of the virus spreading in the community, and rapid test kits, if found to be working correctly, should be used to test as many people

A polymerase chain reaction test requires a nasopharyngeal swab, which only specially trained personnel can extract. But a rapid test only requires a blood sample, which any health care professional should be able to draw

Three more Covid-19 cases were reported on Saturday, all

Sudurpaschim Province, with one case of local transmission, raising alarm among authorities.

According to the Ministry of Health, three patients who tested positive for Covid-19 on Saturday are: a 21-year-old man from Kailali, who recently returned from Mumbai; a 41-year-old man from Kanchanpur who returned from Uttarakhand; and a 34-year-old woman from Kailali, who is a relative of a person who had earlier tested positive for the disease

According to an official at the Provincial Health Directorate of Sudurpaschim Province, the 34-yearold 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.

The Covid-19 tally now has reached nine, and half of them are from Sudurpaschim Province alone. On Thursday a 19-year old woman from Baglung had tested positive to the disease. Earlier, two women, one 19 years old and another 59 years old, from Baglung had tested positive for

Khatiwada said the Cabinet has also decided to enforce the lockdown more strictly, completely banning travel even between municipalities.

"The decision will be enforced in close coordination with the provincial and local governments," he said.

Saturday's Cabinet meeting, however, did not decide on extending the lockdown, which is to remain in force until April 7 midnight.

"The next Cabinet meeting will take necessary decisions [regarding the lockdown]," said Khatiwada.

The government first imposed a weeklong nationwide lockdown effective from March 24 only to extend it until April 7 midnight. But given the rising number of cases, it extended the lockdown until April 15 to contain the spread of the virus



People submit application forms for emergency relief package at the Ward 4 office of Lalitpur Metropolitan City in Jawalakhel on Saturday.

### As Province 5 steps up contact tracing to avoid outbreak, health workers decry lack of resources

**BUTWAL, APRIL 4** 

Twelve days after the government imposed a nationwide lockdown in a bid to control the spread of Covid-19, Province 5 government has said it has intensified the search for individuals who have returned to Nepal after the global spread of the viral disease.

Local units in the province have started collecting the record of returnees and quarantining them, but it hasn't been effective, as many are reluctant to come out, officials say.

All 109 local units of Province 5 have set up quarantine facilities, but

those who have been residing in those facilities are leaving them since they lack basic amenities. Locals have complained of a lack of drinking water, proper latrine and electricity.

According to data from the Province Health Directorate, as of Saturday, a total of 2,351 people have been quarantined in various facilities across 12 districts. About 300 health workers have been deployed at those facilities, according to Provincial Minister of Social Development Sudarshan Baral.

The health workers, however, are concerned for their safety, as the province lacks personal protective equipment. While the demand for PPEs is

estimated at 10,000, only 1,135 sets have been supplied so far, according to Dinesh Chapagain, director of supply department at the social development ministry. "All the equipment received from the federal government have been distributed among districts, he said

Focal Personal Dr Sudarshan Thapa of the Temporary Coronavirus Hospital in Butwal said that health personnel are concerned that they might contract the disease since they don't have protective gears.

"The number of protective kits we currently have is clearly not enough,"

Besides coronavirus-specific hospitals, Province 5 has set up four isolation hospitals that will treat those who show symptoms of the disease. Until Saturday, a total of 124 individuals have registered at the isolation hospitals, according to Province 5 Health Director Dr Binod Giri

In the province, 83 samples of throat swabs have been tested so far, of which 71 have tested negative and the results of the remaining 12 tests are pending.

Meanwhile, all the border points in Bardiya have been sealed after two of its neighbouring districts, Kailali and Kanchanpur, reported three Covid-19 cases on Saturday.

### Garbage collectors who make sure diseases don't spread are now at risk of infections

Sanitation workers are a high-risk group since they come into contact with objects that could host the coronavirus but they're working without proper protective gear.



POST PHOTO: KARIN ADHIKARI

A man pushes a garbage rickshaw in Kathmandu on Saturday, the twelfth day of the nationwide lockdown.

KATHMANDU, APRIL4

While most of Kathmandu has been forced indoors by the lockdown, Babu Pode still leaves home every day at 5:30 am. He goes to Kalimati, then Teku hospital and up to Tripureshwor, collecting garbage.

Pode is one 835 garbage collectors and sweepers employed by the Kathmandu Metropolitan City and as an essential service, they continue to go from road-to-road-alley-toalley collecting garbage and sweeping the streets. And most of them do so without adequate protection from the coronavirus.

"Everyone is inside, but we have no choice even though we are at very high risk of contracting the coronavirus," said 42-year-old Pode. "The city has just provided us with a surgical mask and gloves. We don't feel safe."

Alongside city employees like Pode, there are around 2,500 privately employed garbage collectors, who are all at heightened risk of contracting Covid-19, say doctors.

"People who pick up garbage are at risk, not from person-to-person but from objects that might have been touched and discarded by infected persons," said Dr Sher Bahadur Pun, a virologist at the Sukraraj Tropical and

Infectious Disease Hospital.

Like Pode, 39-year-old Maya Tamang, also a garbage collector, said that she is afraid of contracting the disease. Although she's privately employed, all she's received as protective gear is a pair of surgical gloves and a

"I have been using the cloth mask and the gloves by washing them after use," said

According to Nawaraj Maskey, owner of a private garbage collection company that mobilises 20 garbage collectors every morning, there is a shortage of protective gear in the market and they've only been able to provide equipment that might not be effective enough to prevent Covid-19.

"I have talked to city officials but they keep saying they will get the protective equipment soon," he said. "It's been two weeks and we still don't have it.

When Mitra Ghimire, general secretary at the Solid Waste Management Association Nepal, an umbrella organisation of over 70 private garbage collection companies, visited the Health Ministry to ask for supplies, he was told that since even doctors don't have safety measures right now, they couldn't expect Personal Protective Equipment for

garbage collectors, he said.

But it's not just protective equipment, garbage collectors are facing numerous difficulties carrying out their jobs. Without public transport, they have to walk to their assigned areas for clean-up and while on their way, they are often harassed and detained by the police, according to city police inspector Purna Chandra Bhatta, who is responsible for mobilising sweepers and garbage collectors. In the first week of the lockdown, he had to get half a dozen detained garbage collectors released, he said.

"It's hard for the people collecting garbage," said Bhatta. "If these people are not mobilised, there will be a risk of other

According to Kathmandu's environment division chief Hari Bahadur Shrestha, the city is working to obtain protective gear but he was unsure when exactly these would be distributed to garbage collectors and sweepers. "We can't stay at home, as officials call for work calling it an emergency sector. Even my children whose schools are closed due to coronavirus do not want me to go out, but I have to work for them," said Pode.

Until Saturday, over 1.13 million people had contracted Covid-19, with 60,381 global deaths.

### Coronavirus testing hospitals in Province 1 shirk their responsibility

Patients with flu-like symptoms are being referred to BP Koirala Insititute of Health Sciences without tests, doctors at Dharan-based hospital say.

PRADEEP MENYANGBO

The government has designated various hospitals in Province 1 to treat Covid-19 patients and collect their swab samples for lab tests . But many of these hospitals have been reportedly referring all patients with Covid-19-like symptoms to the BP Koirala Institute of Health Sciences in Dharan without running

Of late, the flow of patients at the BP Koirala Institute of Health Sciences has increased, which has led to the shortage of medical essentials at

'The other hospitals are directly referring the patients here without making sure if they need Covid-19 tests," one of the doctors at the Dharanbased hospital told the Post.

"The government has provided Viral Transport Medium, Personal Protective Kits and other equipment to these hospitals to collect swab samples. But they are not using them. Meanwhile, our hospital is running out of supplies," said the doctor who did not wish to be identified.

The provincial government has said that patients can undergo swab tests for coronavirus infection at Koshi, Nobel and Birat hospitals in Biratnagar and some hospitals in

But most of these hospitals have not been conducting the tests on the patients with the complaints of fever, common cold and other respiratory problems.

Dr Surya Prasad Rimal, assistant professor at the BP Koirala Institute of Health Sciences, said the hospital's emergency ward was dealing with a sudden influx of patients, most of them suffering from flu-like symptoms.

"The patients who could easily get treatment at their local health facilities are also being referred to the hospital as suspected Covid-19 patients" Rimal told the Post.

The BP Koirala Institute of Health Sciences started conducting Covid-19 swab tests four days ago. As of Friday, the hospital has conducted 39 tests, 24 of which were negative while the other test results are awaited.

'We just started the test service from our hospital, but some patients are not convinced with the results," Dr Ashok Air, spokesperson at the hospital, told the Post, recalling one incident where a patient had questioned the accuracy of the test after his results came negative for coro-

The lab of BP Koirala Institute of Health Sciences can perform 12 swab samples at a

"It takes 10 to 12 hours to complete the test. We use the WHO-approved advanced molecular technology to conduct the test, so there is no reason to doubt the results," Dr Narayan Bhattarai, of the Microbiology Department at the hospital, told the Post.

### Gandaki government orders hospitals to treat patients, or face action

LAL PRASAD SHARMA POKHARA, APRIL 4

The Gandaki government has made it mandatory for all hospitals and health facilities in the province to provide treatment to all patients. The directive comes three days after the

Supreme Court issued an order to the government to make necessary arrangements for the treatment of Covid-19 patients at private hospitals and medical facilities amid reports that private hospitals were refusing to treat patients with symptoms linked to the contagious Local administrators of all districts in the

province have been ordered to take action under the Infectious Disease Act, 2020(1964) and other prevailing laws of the country if health facilities don't serve their patients, said Ram Sharan Basnet, Minister for Physical Infrastructures Development, also the spokesperson for the provincial government. The provincial Cabinet has also directed the

Ministry of Social Development, the lead agency to oversee government efforts to fight the epidemic, not to approve leave requests by any employees, except those who need time off of work for birth and funeral rites.

According to the Cabinet decision, this rule also applies for hospitals and health facilities affiliated to private, community and educational institutions. Basnet added that all chiefs of government offices under the provincial government have been directed to attend their

"The government has also directed the chiefs of those government offices to make their employees available whenever needed," Basnet

Basnet said, "We have decided to coordinate with the federal Ministry of Health and Population and take further steps towards purchasing medical equipment and medicines to mitigate the risk of the virus.'

The Cabinet has also directed district administration offices to keep ambulances and their drivers on standby in view of the pandemic.

The BP Koirala Institute of Health Sciences is the second health institution in the country to collect samples and run Covid-19 tests after Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Diseases Hospital in Teku, Kathmandu.

#### **NATIONAL**

THE KATHMANDU POST

### 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.

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

But the facility, set up at the behest of the Province 2 government, is illequipped 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 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 sol-

diers 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," sad a 34-year-old quarantine patient. "There's no internet, no TV, no books and papers. It's difficult to spend

### Oli government's fiascos ...

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 com rades. Cabinet and high-level coordi nation committee meetings are sitting when necessary. In today's context sec retariat can also be held following the health protocol. So I believe the meeting will be held soon, and it must,' Shrestha tweeted on Saturday.

### Timber smugglers entering forests during lockdown

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

"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 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 forest team recovered two logs, behind by the loggers.

### With local infection ...

"We should forget symptoms, as asymptomatic patients can pass the virus to many," a doctor at the Sukraraj Hospital told the Post on condition of anonymity. "Local transmission means the level of risk has increased. Time is running out very fast and we need to act immediately to mitigate the risk.'

Doctors and public health experts believe that the government has not realised the gravity of the situation and is still treating the pandemic flippantly. In the past few days, controversy after controversy has dogged the government, with the Health Ministry pulled into a corruption scandal over procurement of medical equipment

On Thursday, in an interview with Naya Patrika, Defence Minister Ishwar Pokhrel, who leads the high-level coordination committee to

control Covid-19, appeared largely unaware of the magnitude of the outbreak and was cavalier in his answers to pressing questions.

"We are still not taking the issue seriously and diverting public attention to other things," said Dr Mingmar Gyelzen Sherpa, a former director-general of the Department of Health Services. "We will not be able to control things if we let the disease

spread in the community." According to Sherpa, there are numerous examples from across the world to study and learn from, including the mistakes that the governments of the European Union and the United States have made. "The ongoing lockdown needs to be prolonged and all areas where local transmission was reported need to be sealed," said Sherpa. "And we need to test all suspected cases to lessen the risk of an outbreak in the community."

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

RUPA GAHATRAJ IN NEPALGUNJ & NARAYAN SHARMA IN NAWALPARASI

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."

was happy with the authorities

"It's such a relief," said Gharti. "I was worried about being sent to

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 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 following 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. Dotel, Bhutal and is currently staying on a

dozen Nepalis have been stuck in Valmiki Ñagar since March 25, the day India enforced the lockdown. "I came to the hospital for a checkup but was not able to return to Nepal

hospital's premises, said that two

after India announced a 21-day lockdown," Dotel told the Post over the Dharmagat Dhakal, a sub Inspector at Tribeni Police Post at Binayi Tribeni Rural Municipality Ward No.

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

6 in Nawalparasi (East), said, "We

to bring them back to Nepal. "We are living in difficult circumstances. Nobody has come forward to help us." Dhakal says that given the lock-

down, authorities cannot do much to help the stranded Nepalis in Valmiki "We have informed the Home

Ministry about the situation," he

said. "There is not much we can do

**RAUTAHAT, APRIL 4** 

Police seize ambulances

illegally carrying passengers

The Area Police Office in Chandranigahapur on confiscated ambulances allegedly 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 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 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

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 lock-

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.



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

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

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

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 dip-

lomat, 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.'

#### **FOREX** US Dollar Furo Pound Sterling Japanese Yen Chinese Yuan 33.32 Qatari Riyal 73.21 Malaysian Ringit 28.04 32.48 Saudi Arab Rival Exchange rates fixed by Nepal Rastra Rank

**BULLION** PRICE PER TOLA Fine Gold Rs 77,000 Rs 720

SOURCE: FENEGOSIDA

**GASOLINE WATCH** 



## Foreign currency inflow shrinks on virus crisis

Earnings are down with remittance, exports and tourism all taking a direct hit from the pandemic.

PRITHVI MAN SHRESTHA

Commercial banks are exchanging less foreign currency with the central bank as the Covid-19 outbreak bites into cash inflows

Banks sell their excess foreign exchange to Nepal Rastra Bank on a daily basis which normally amounts to \$20-40 million. They enter their proposals to sell foreign funds on the central bank's website till 12 noon, and get domestic currency in return.

Nowadays, commercial banks are not selling much foreign exchange to the central bank as they are keeping larger stocks for themselves through inter-bank trading as the inflow has slowed to a trickle with remittance, exports and tourism all taking a direct hit from the pandemic.

"They are still selling foreign exchange to us, but in very small amounts," said Bam Bahadur Mishra, chief of foreign exchange management department at Nepal Rastra Bank. "This is natural because the inflow of remittance has decreased, and banks are not receiving foreign exchange from tourism and exports,

"The amount of foreign exchange they are selling to the central bank now is very insignificant," another central bank official said.

Commercial banks concur. "Given the huge volatility in the global foreign exchange market, we have witnessed improved demand for foreign exchange in the inter-bank market on account of increased foreign exchange demand to hedge their payment obligations," Pranu Singh, head of corporate affairs, brand and marketing at Standard Chartered Bank Nepal, told



A file photo shows a woman counting US dollar bills at her home in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

"This could result in less foreign exchange surplus remaining with banks to sell to Nepal Rastra Bank."

Bankers admit that due to reduced inflow of remittance, they don't have as much foreign exchange as they used to have in the past.

Anil Shah, chief executive officer at Nabil Bank, said that the inflow of remittance had started to decrease in

recent days. "We are getting hardly any foreign exchange from tourism or exports," he said.

Consequently, the quantity of foreign exchange the bank is selling to the central bank has shrunk to 80 percent of previous amounts

Singh said that they had observed a decrease in forex flows over the past

'With Covid-19 and the recent lockdown across the globe, we are witnessing a slowdown in foreign exchange coming into the country; and we expect the inflow to go down further until the situation improves," she

Before the global health crisis began, banks usually had surplus foreign exchange on account of remittance which makes up more than 26 percent the gross domestic product. They had extra funds which they sold to the central bank after fulfilling their market requirements.

The central bank maintains foreign exchange reserves based on the funds received from commercial banks. An adequate reserve of foreign exchange is essential to ensure that the country is able to import the desired products and services from abroad.

Nepal is heavily dependent on imports for a number of essential goods such as food items, medicines and fuel. Petroleum products are the single largest import item.

In the last fiscal year 2018-19, Nepal imported petroleum products worth Rs216.42 billion, according to the Trade and Export Promotion Centre. The country even imported cereal worth Rs51.8 billion, the centre said.

Nepal also spends a high amount on importing construction materials such as iron and steel products and machinery which are considered capital goods that help boost economic activities in the country.

The country needs to have sufficient stocks of foreign currency to convince potential foreign investors that they will be able to repatriate dividends easily. As of the first seven months of the current fiscal year, the country's foreign exchange reserve stood at Rs1,096 billion which is adequate to import goods and services for 8.5 months, the central bank said.

Nepal Rastra Bank officials said that there was no need to worry about foreign exchange at the moment.

"We are not getting foreign exchange like before from remittance, exports and tourism. But we are also not spending foreign exchange for imports, travel and students who go abroad due to the global lockdown, said Mishra. "As a result, the foreign exchange reserve is largely stable at the moment."

But central bank officials and econ-

omists warn that the situation may worsen in the future if the job markets for Nepali migrant workers shrink in the destination countries should the Covid-19 crisis linger. Remittance is the single largest

source of foreign exchange earning for the country. In the last fiscal year, the country received remittance amounting to Rs879 billion. "If the foreign exchange reserve

starts to go down, we may have to discourage imports of luxury goods, cosmetics and high-end vehicles, among others." said Mishra. "We may have to rethink the repayment schedule of foreign loans which are increasing in recent years.'

The government appears to have sensed a possible crisis. So the cabinet on Sunday decided to ban imports of expensive cars costing more than \$50,000, foreign liquor, betel nut, pea, peppercorn and dried date. It also reduced the gold import quota to 10 kg per day from 20 kg.

"This is a signal that the government may have to take stringent measures if the foreign exchange reserve starts receding rapidly," said Gunakar Bhatta, spokesperson for the central

## Saudi Arabia sharply rebukes Russia over oil price collapse

ASSOCIATED PRESS DUBAI (UNITED ARAB EMIRATES), APRIL 4

Saudi Arabia sharply criticised Russia on Saturday over what it described as Moscow blaming the kingdom for the collapse in global energy prices, showing the tensions ahead of an emergency meeting of OPEC and other oil producers.

Oil prices sharply fell after the so-called OPEC+ group of countries including Russia failed to agree to production cuts in early March. A price war began soon after, with Saudi Arabia threatening to pump at a record-breaking pace to seize back market share even as the coronavirus pandemic saw demand halted flights.

International benchmark Brent crude fell to around \$24 a barrel, compared to prices of over \$70 a year ago. Prices slightly have rebounded with President Donald Trump tweeting and talking about the need for a production cut, but rancor between Saudi Arabia and Russia could imperil a deal emerging from a planned teleconference Monday.

That anger could be seen early Saturday in two critical statements released by the kingdom's state-run Saudi Press Agency.

The first came from Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan under the headline: "Statements Attributed to One of Russian President's Media Are Completely Devoid of Truth."

"Russia was the one that refused the agreement, while the kingdom and 22 other countries were trying to persuade Russia to make further cuts and extend the agreement," the prince

He also said an alleged Russian contention that "the kingdom was planning to get rid of shale oil producers" was false as well. US shale producers have made America one of the world's top producers, but they've been hurt badly by the price collapse. Trump has met with concerned producers about Prince Faisal did not identify the

story, nor the outlet he was critiquing. A second statement came from Saudi Energy Minister Prince Salman's sons. The prince criticised Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak by name for suggesting Saudi Arabia wanted to cut out shale pro-

The prince "expressed his surprise at the attempts to bring Saudi Arabia into hostilities against the shale oil industry, which is completely false as our Russian friends recognise well,' the statement said.

Saudi Arabia's statements likely seek to defuse any possible confrontation between kingdom and Trump, who tweeted Thursday that Moscow and Riyadh "will be cutting back approximately 10 Million Barrels" without elaborating. Trump's tweets and public comments have affected oil prices

### IMF sees coronavirus-induced global downturn 'way worse' than financial crisis

WASHINGTON/GENEVA, APRIL 4

The coronavirus pandemic has brought the global economy to a standstill and plunged the world into a recession that will be "way worse" than the global financial crisis a decade ago, the head of the International

Monetary Fund said on Friday, calling

it "humanity's darkest hour."

The IMF's managing director, Kristalina Georgieva, speaking at a rare joint news conference with the leader of the World Health Organization (WHO), called on advanced economies to step up their efforts to help emerging markets and developing countries survive the economic and health impact of the pan-

"This is a crisis like no other," she told some 400 reporters on a video the world economy coming to a standstill. We are now in recession. It is way worse than the global financial crisis of 2008-2009.

World Bank President David Malpass echoed her outlook in a post on LinkedIn, writing, "Beyond the health impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, we are expecting a major global recession.'

More than 1 million people worldwide have been infected with COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus, and more than 53,000 have died, a Reuters tally showed on Friday.

Georgieva said the IMF was working with the World Bank and WHO to advance their call for China and other official bilateral creditors to suspend debt collections from the poorest countries for at least a year until the



A deserted Brent Cross shopping centre is seen in London, as the spread of the coronavirus ease continues, in London, Britain.

pandemic subsides.

She said China had engaged "constructively" on the issue, and the IMF would work on a specific proposal in coming weeks with the Paris Club of creditor nations, the Group of 20 major economies and the World Bank for review at the annual Spring Meetings, which will be held online in about two weeks.

In his posting, Malpass said a debt standstill could begin on May 1, providing added liquidity for the poorest countries as they battle the disease. During the suspension period, he said, the World Bank and the IMF could evaluate the sustainability of those countries' debt and the possible need for a debt reduction by official creditors and commercial creditors.

Emerging markets and developing economies have been hard hit by the crisis, Georgieva said, noting that nearly \$90 billion in investments had already flowed out of emerging markets, far more than during the financial crisis. Some countries are also suffering from sharp drops in com-More than 90 countries—nearly

half the IMF's 189 members-have asked for emergency funding from the IMF to respond to the pandemic, she The IMF and WHO have called for

emergency aid to be used mainly to strengthen health systems, pay doctors and nurses, and buy protective

Georgieva said the IMF stood ready to use as much of its "war chest" of \$1 trillion in financing capability as

The IMF has begun disbursing funds to requesting countries, includ-

ing Rwanda, with requests from two additional African nations to be "This is, in my lifetime, humanity's

darkest hour-a big threat to the whole world-and it requires from us to stand tall, be united, and protect the most vulnerable of our fellow citizens," she said. She said central banks and finance

ministers had already taken unprecedented steps to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and stabilize markets, but more work was needed to keep liquidity flowing, especially to emerging markets.

To that end, the IMF's board in coming days would review a proposal to create a new short-term liquidity line to help provide funds to countries facing problems. Georgieva also urged central banks and particularly the US Federal Reserve to continue offering swap lines to emerging economies.

### US airlines apply for US payroll help but terms still unclear

**REUTERS** CHICAGO/WASHINGTON, APRIL 4

Major US airlines applied on Friday for payroll grants from the US Treasury meant to keep workers employed during a sharp downturn resulting from the coronavirus outbreak, but while talks over the terms were expected to continue in coming days some warned the funds would not be enough to help them through their toughest crisis ever.

American Airlines Group Inc, United Airlines Holdings Inc, Delta Air Lines Inc, Southwest Airlines Co, JetBlue Airways Corp and Hawaiian Airlines each said they submitted grant applications, but did not disclose details or terms.

Treasury asked companies to propose financial instruments such as warrants or equity options as possible taxpayer compensation for up to \$32 billion in payroll grants for airlines, cargo carriers and airport contractors under the CARES Act passed by

Congress last week. Treasury set a 5 p.m. EDT (2100 GMT) Friday deadline to expedite the grants. There is a second final dead-

line on April 27. The airline industry and some law-



Delta Air Lines passenger planes are seen parked due to flight reductions made to slow the spread of coronavirus disease, at Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport in Birmingham, Alabama, US.

makers have pushed back on the possibility of the government taking an equity stake in exchange for the

grants, which companies and unions argue are strictly to protect workers. Southwest said on Friday that gov-

ernment support is just one possible source of capital it is evaluating as it discusses the terms of the grants

In memos to employees, Delta and JetBlue executives warned that government funds would not be enough to help them weather an unprecedented crisis in which they are spending more cash every day than they are bringing in.

Companies were allowed to ask Treasury for the amount they paid in salaries and benefits in the second and third quarters of 2019, and must agree to keep their workforce until Sept. 30 and maintain a certain level of air

American Airlines, with the largest number of full-time employees among US airlines, at 133,700 in 2019, had said it would seek up to \$6 billion in grants and \$6 billion in government loans under a separate \$32 billion funding option for the sector.

American's stock hit a record low on Friday. Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway Inc, which is among the largest shareholders of the top US airlines, said it sold about 18 percent of its Delta stake and 4 percent of its Southwest holding.

Among cargo carriers, FedEx Corp said it could benefit from certain government relief options after outlining other steps it is taking to save cash and boost liquidity, including slashing its chief executive officer's pay and drawing down \$1.5 billion from a credit facility.

Cargo carriers are suffering from disruption to global supply chains and high-margin business-to-business demand, even as ground-package delivery services increase.

Airlines have also raised debt and taken a series of cost-cutting measures as they ground an unprecedented number of planes and implement new policies on ticket refunds and exchanges in an effort to encourage passengers to book flights.

Passenger airlines are eligible for \$25 billion in cash grants, cargo carriers \$4 billion, and airport contractors like caterers and airplane cleaners \$3 billion, and an equal amount in loans.

Other airlines across the world are seeking government aid as they brace for a prolonged downturn, with Air France-KLM in talks with banks to receive up to 6 billion euros (\$6.5 billion) in loans guaranteed by the French and Dutch governments, sources told Reuters.

Planemakers are also preparing for a slump in demand. Reuters reported on Friday that Airbus SE is studying a sharp cut in output of its top-selling A320 jet series.

#### WORLD

**BRIEFING** 

#### Starmer elected Labour leader

LONDON: Britain's main opposition Labour party on Saturday announced that Keir Starmer had been elected as its new leader, replacing Jeremy Corbyn who resigned after its crushing December election defeat. The 57-year-old former chief state prosecutor defeated Corbyn lovalist Rebecca Long-Bailey and backbencher Lisa Nandy for the top job. Angela Rayner becomes the new deputy leader, Labour announced on Twitter, after it was forced to cancel a special conference because of the coronavirus outbreak.

#### Vietnam protests Beijing's sinking of South China Sea boat

HANOI: Vietnam has lodged an official protest with China following the sinking of a Vietnamese fishing boat it said had been rammed by a Chinese maritime surveillance vessel near islands in the disputed South China Sea. The Vietnamese fishing vessel, with eight fishermen onboard, was fishing near the Paracel Islands on Thursday when it was rammed and sunk by the Chinese vessel, Vietnam's foreign ministry said in a statement

#### European Union backs US plan for Venezuela

BRUSSELS: The European Union on Friday welcomed a US plan for a transitional government in Venezuela and subsequent lifting of economic sanctions. Washington last month suggest ed that both hard left President Nicolas Maduro and his rival Juan Guaido-previously backed by the US—step aside in favour of a transitional administration made up of members of both their parties. The shift in US tactics came as fears grow that the coronavirus pandemic will spread rapidly both inside and from Venezuela, an oil-wealthy nation now crumbling in an economic crisis

### Indian power grid operators scramble to prepare for Modi's lights off plan

CHENNAI/MUMBAI. APRIL 4

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's appeal to citizens to switch off lights across India on Sunday to mark the coronavirus fight is generating a lot vork and some tough challenge for India's power sector workers. On Friday, Modi appealed to Indians

to turn out their lights for nine minutes at 9 pm on Sunday to show solidarity amid the coronavirus lockdown with a show of lamps, candles and flashlights.

The appeal, however, set off alarm bells for those in charge of India's power grid, prompting a flurry of orders to officials manning generation plants and managing grid load, amid concerns that a surge in voltage due to a steep dip in demand could harm the grid and cause widespread outages.

India's Power System Operation Corp (POSOCO), which oversees the national power grid, ordered all senior officials to be present at generating stations, substations and load despatch centres across India between 6 pm and 10 pm on Sunday.

It advised engineers to start reducing output from baseload plants such as coal-fired power stations just ahead of 9 pm and ramp up generation from hydro and gas plants, typically used to address peak power demand, to manage the anticipated gyration in demand

POSOCO expects consumption to dip by over 10 percent when Indians switch off lights, it said in an advisory sent to grid operators across the country, calling the expected reduction in load and rapid recovery, "unprecedented".

India's Ministry of Power sought to allay concerns though, and said in a statement, "The Indian Electricity grid is robust and stable and adequate arrangements and protocols are in place to handle the variation in demand."

Modi has ordered India's 1.3 billion people indoors to avert a massive outbreak of coronavirus infections, but the world's biggest shutdown has left millions without jobs and forced migrant workers to flee home to their

Nitin Raut, the power minister of Maharashtra, a western state which consumes the most electricity in India, appealed to citizens to light lamps and candles, while keeping lights on to ensure proper functioning of the grid.

"Already the electricity demand and supply equation has been stretched,' said Raut, adding the possibility of grid failures "could not be ruled out."

## China mourns coronavirus dead as Americans are told to wear masks

Since Covid-19 emerged late last year, around 1.1 million people have fallen ill. Almost 60,000 people have died.

**AGENCE-FRANCE PRESSE** 

China paid homage on Saturday to victims of the coronavirus in the place where the global pandemic began, as Americans were warned to wear masks amid fears the disease can be spread by breathing.

The advice came as America logged another huge rise in its death toll—almost 1,500 in one day—and as new infections continued unabated.

Since Covid-19 emerged late last year, around 1.1 million people have fallen ill. Almost 60,000 people have died.

China, which appears to be over the worst of its outbreak, on Saturday held a national day of mourning for its dead-well over 3,000 people have died since the virus emerged there late last year.

Beijing has said the observance is a chance to mourn virus "martyrs"—an honorific title bestowed by the government this week on 14 medical workers who died fighting the outbreak—including the man who was punished by officials for raising the initial alarm.

While there are signs of normality returning in some parts of China as movement restrictions are eased, large swathes of the world remain in dire straits.

Europe accounts for the lion"s share of the dead, with Italy and Spain bearing the brunt.

But the situation is rapidly deteriorating in the United States, and President Donald Trump's administration on Friday suggested widespread use of simple masks or scarves might help stem the rocketing infection rate.

"It"s going to be really a voluntary thing," Trump said. "You don"t have to do it and I'm choosing not to do it, but some people may want to do it and Anthony Fauci, head of infectious

diseases at the National Institutes of Health, cited "recent information that the virus can actually be spread even when people just speak as opposed to coughing and sneezing."

The World Health Organisation has



Security personnel pay tribute as China holds national mourning for those who died of the coronavirus disease, in Beijing, China on Saturday.

been more cautious, saying the airborne threat was only known to occur during certain medical treatments.

The US recommendation will likely worsen an already severe shortage of masks in the United States and Europe, which both rely heavily on imports from China.

Officials in New York, the worst affected part of the US, began advising people to wear masks some days ago, and there were signs on the streets that the advice was being heeded. Around 278,000 Americans have tested positive for the disease, and the infection curve shows no sign of flattening, despite nine in 10 citizens living under some sort of lockdown.

Europe's awful death toll hit 40,000 on Friday, with Spain reporting more than 900 deaths in 24 hours.

Spaniard Javier Lara survived after

being put on oxygen in an overcrowded intensive care unit—a shock to a 29-year-old who was athletic and does not smoke.

"I was panicking that my daughter would get infected. When I started showing symptoms, I said I wouldn"t hold her or go near her," he said, describing facing death with an eight-week-old as the "worst moment" in his life.

But there were also signs the peak may have hit on the continent.

Hardest-hit Italy recorded 766 new deaths but its infections rose by just four per cent, the lowest yet, according to the civil protection service.

"It"s true that the latest figures, as high as they are, give us a little bit of hope, as the growth in new infections is slower than it was a few days ago," said Chancellor Angela Merkel of

Germany, where strict social distancing measures are credited with curbing the spread.

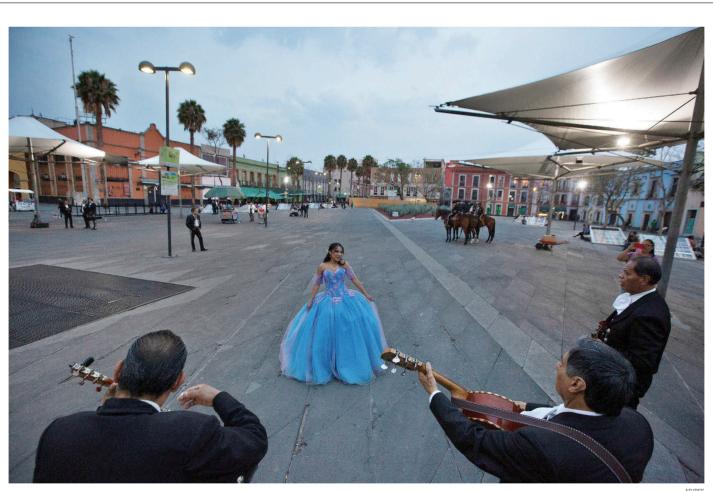
"But it is definitely much too early to see a clear trend in that, and it is certainly too early to think in any way about relaxing the strict rules we have given ourselves," she added. There was, however, yet another

warning over the fate of the less developed world, especially conflict zones or places with large refugee populations. "The worst is yet to come," UN

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said, referring to countries such as Syria, Libya and Yemen.

'The Covid-19 storm is now coming to all these theatres of conflict.'

The world economy has been pummelled by the virus and associated



A girl dances as mariachis perform in her honour to mark her 15th birthday in the popular Garibaldi square, now empty of visitors, in Mexico City.

Indian officials warn of lockdown extensions as Covid-19 cases in South Asia near 6,000 REUTERS

The number of confirmed new coronavirus cases in South Asia neared 6,000 on Saturday, even as authorities in some cities tightened restrictions on movement and warned lockdowns could be extended in a bid to rein in the pandemic.

"If people don't obey the rules seriously and cases continue to rise, then there may be no option but to extend the lockdown," Rajesh Tope, the health minister of Maharashtra state which includes the financial hub Mumbai, told Reuters. "It could be extended in Mumbai and urban areas of Maharashtra by two weeks.'

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi said this week the country will pull out of the planned three-week lockdown in a phased manner. India has been hardest hit by the disease in South Asia with some 2,902 cases, of which 68 have died.

Maharashtra has 516 confirmed cases of Covid-19 and 26 people

The number of Covid-19 cases has more than doubled in the region in the last week.

While the government does plan to review the lockdown, set to end on April 14, three senior officials told Reuters this will depend on an assessment of the situation in each state, and lockdowns and restrictions would be extended in districts where the coronavirus case spread has continued.

Public transport in large metros such as Mumbai, Bengaluru and Delhi, may only be restored in a phased manner days after the lockdown ends, said the officials, who asked not to be named as the plans were still under discussion.

The number of Covid-19 cases has more than doubled in South Asia in the last week. Health experts warn an epidemic in the region, home to a fifth of the world's population, could overwhelm its already weak public health

But Muslim-majority Pakistan and Bangladesh, and India, home to the world's largest Muslim minority, have struggled to convince conservative religious groups to maintain social

On Friday, Pakistani Muslims at a Karachi mosque clashed with baton-wielding police trying to enforce new curbs on gatherings to prevent Friday prayers and contain coronavirus infections, officials said. This came after the government in the southern province of Sindh, home to the financial hub of Karachi, enforced a three-hour curfew on Friday afternoon, in a bid to persuade Muslim worshippers to pray at

Pakistan has so far reported 2,547 coronavirus infections, fuelled by a jump in cases related to members of the Tablighi Jamaat, an orthodox proselytising Muslim Afghanistan has registered 281 cases, including 6 deaths. Sri Lanka has registered 159 cases, including five deaths. Bangladesh has registered 61 cases, including six deaths.

### At funerals in virus outbreak, mourning is from a distance

**ASSOCIATED PRESS** 

LEXINGTON, SOUTH CAROLINA, APRIL 4

No one stands in line to embrace the widow and share memories of her husband of 50 years. No rows of family and friends file toward the flagdraped coffin to pay their last respects. No symphony of sniffles is heard across the room as the minister gives a final prayer.

Instead, a handful of people are scattered across one chapel row as if they're strangers, not blood. White roses are pinned to empty chairs, representing those who couldn't be there. An iPad on a tripod livestreams the service for people stuck at home across state lines.

"This is going to be a different experience for all of us," the minister tells the half-dozen people gathered at a South Carolina funeral home to celebrate the life of J. Robert Coleman, an Army veteran, husband to Gloria, father to three sons and grandfather to three children. "But one thing that will be common is that as we conduct this service today, we're going to open with a prayer."

Unspoken was the reason this funeral, and untold others across the

world, is different: The coronavirus outbreak, stay-at-home orders and the rules of social distancing are dramatically altering the way families and communities mourn the passing of loved ones.

"It's hard enough to lose a loved one, but then to have the traditions that usually bring comfort at a time like this seemingly not available just kind of compounds the grief that families feel," said Justin Baxley, of Woodridge Memorial Park & Funeral Home.

 $Like\,most\,funeral\,homes,\,Woodridge$ is limiting the number of people allowed for services.

Many families find it hard to choose which loved ones will be invited to the in-person gathering and which will be relegated to watch via livestream, if at all.

But Coleman's family said in their case, travel restrictions due to the virus and the nature of their small, close-knit family made following the fewer-than-10-people mandate simple. John Coleman said those who mattered most to his dad were there—his wife, Gloria, and his sons. The only one missing was his beloved dog,

"That's the most important,"

Coleman said. "We weren't brought up to care if we were around a big group.'

Robert Coleman died suddenly last week. One of his sons found him at home in Columbia. The family said he went peacefully, possibly of a heart attack, but because the 69-year-old had complained of chest pain the day before, he was tested for COVID-19.

Days later, the test came back negative. But regardless of the cause of death, funerals still must abide by rules aimed at preventing any possible exposure to the virus.



A tablet livestreams a funeral in Lexington, South Carolina. Following CDC guidelines during the coronavirus outbreak, fewer than 10 people attended the service.

At Woodridge Memorial Park, a bottle of hand sanitizer and a sign asking guests to kindly refrain from handshaking now sits beside the guestbook. Chairs are spaced apart. Much of the funeral planning among family and staff is done via video chat. And the demand for livestreaming services

has skyrocketed. At Coleman's funeral, most of his family chose to sit in the front row, but a sister-in-law, citing social distance, made her way alone to the back. During the service, Gloria Coleman cried and pulled down her sunglasses, hiding her eyes. With the chairs separated, her sons couldn't reach out to comfort her.

"Your husband, your father, a model of faithfulness for you," Pastor Brett DeYoung said in his brief remarks. "Now it's time for you to continue that legacy by modelling that integrity and faithfulness to your family and

The family followed the casket outside, where two uniformed soldiers waited to honour Coleman's service to his country—a ritual usually held inside, but moved to follow guidelines. A bugler played taps, and Gloria accepted a folded American flag.

#### **BRIEFING**

#### **CONCACAF Nations** semi-finals called off

MIAMI: The CONCACAF Nations League semi-finals and final in June were called off on Friday, a decision that leaves the US men to play their fewest matches in a year since 2007. The US had been scheduled to play Honduras on June 4 in Houston, with Mexico meeting Costa Rica in the other semi-final. The winners were to play three days later at Arlington, Texas. The Confederation of North and Central American and Caribbean Football said Friday it made the decision due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. It is not yet known when the matches will be rescheduled. The US has played just once this year, a 1-0 exhibition win over Costa Rica on February 1.

#### Coach Flick gets permanent **Bayern Munich deal**

MUNICH: Bavern Munich gave coach Hansi Flick a new contract through to 2023 on Friday after he impressed in what was initially an interim appointment. Flick was the assistant to Niko Kovac but stepped up to the head coach role when Kovac was fired in November after a 5-1 loss to Eintracht Frankfurt. Since then Flick has got Bayern's challenge for an eighth straight Bundesliga title back on track and kept up a winning run in the Champions League. Bayern led the Bundesliga by four points when play was suspended last month due to the coronavirus pandemic

#### Joshua-Pulev heavyweight title fight postponed

LONDON: The world heavyweight title fight between Briton Anthony Joshua and the IBF's mandatory challenger Kubrat Pulev of Bulgaria originally scheduled for June 20 has been postponed, promoters Matchroom Boxing said on Friday. Joshua's defence of his IBF, WBA, WBO and IBO titles was set to take place at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium but the coronavirus outbreak has brought global sport to a standstill, with no competition taking place in the United Kingdom. "A new date for the event... is currently being worked on," Matchroom Boxing said in a statement. "We will announce any updates in due course and continue to explore the possibility of hosting this fight at the Tottenham Hotspur (AGENCIES)

## Premier League on hold, players to be asked for wage cut

Restart date for suspended season kept under review. Clubs to consult with players over proposed pay reduction.



A file photo shows Liverpool's Mohamed Salah (left) and Bournemouth's Ryan Fraser vying for the ball during their English Premier League match.

**REUTERS** LONDON, APRIL 4

The Premier League has said its clubs will consult with their players over a proposed 30 percent reduction in wages and the suspended season would only resume when it was "safe and appropriate".

The league accepted that a previous target of returning to action in early May would not now happen and said on Friday it was keeping the restart date under "constant review". While there has been speculation about a reduced season or even abandoning this campaign, the league said the aim was still to complete all remaining domestic league and cup matches.

"However, any return to play will only be with the full support of Government and when medical guidance allows," it added in a statement. With lower league clubs facing a cashflow crisis due to the coronavirus outbreak, the top-flight teams voted to make an advance of 125 million pounds (\$153.13 million) to the Football League (EFL) and National League

The EFL, which consists of the 72 professional clubs in the three divisions below the Premier League, said the cash they would receive from the top flight included early solidarity payments, parachute payments and Academy Grants. Much of the focus of talks between officials this week has been the issue of player compensation during the

The league said its clubs "unanimously agreed to consult their players regarding a combination of

conditional reductions and deferrals amounting to 30 percent of total annual remuneration". Talks with the players' union, the PFA, will continue on Saturday, as the two sides seek an agreement on compensation during

Sports Minister Nigel Huddleston said it was right that players' wages were on the table when there were lower-paid staff at some clubs being furloughed. "The football authorities must all be aware of the strength of public feeling on this and I expect them to show leadership on the matter," he said.

The Premier League said it was "committing 20 million pounds to support the NHS (National Health Service), communities, families and vulnerable groups during the Covid-19 pandemic. "This includes a direct financial contribution to the NHS and funds to enable clubs to refocus their efforts and develop significant outreach programmes to help communities, including those most in need."

Less than 24 hours after Health Minister Matt Hancock said players should take a pay cut and "play their part" in the national effort to tackle the pandemic, two moves also emerged from the players themselves. Manchester United captain Harry Maguire asked his teammates to donate 30 percent of their salaries to local hospitals and was given backing by the squad.

England defender Maguire was among the 20 Premier League captains who took part in a call on Thursday evening to discuss a collective response and donation with plans now expected to be developed.

#### Many players cannot afford wage cuts, union claims

REUTERS

Many professional footballers around the world earn little more than an average income and cannot afford to have their wages cut during the coronavirus crisis, the global players union FIFPRO told Reuters Television

Players in England's high-earning Premier League have faced calls to accept wage cuts while the sport is at a standstill, but FIFPRO General Secretary Jonas Baer-Hoffmann said the situation was very different elsewhere. "Most players can only afford a pay cut as much as any other worker, he said. "Their income is not in the range that people assume it to be."

'They are paid much less, often around average national income. Minimum wage players exist around the world and, for them, any cuts can have drastic personal consequences in terms of simply paying rent or buying groceries for their families." He added that even within leagues the situation could vary greatly between clubs. "Juventus has a completely different outlook to the teams in the 17th, 18th or 19th places," he said.

Last Saturday, Italian champions Juve said their players had accepted wage cuts from March to June, an agreement which Baer-Hoffmann welcomed. However, he added that while the majority of clubs behaved reasonably, there had also been knee-jerk reactions from a few.

"We have a concern that in some parts of the world many clubs are already turning to unilateral decisions in terms of lay-offs and wage cuts on terms that players simply cannot afford," he said. "The vast majority of clubs are in serious financial distress and, I don't want to generalise, but we do see cases of irresponsible and cynical reactions. ...taking advantage of (the situation) to lay off players." He reiterated that it was essential to try and conclude the current season in European countries and said he was surprised at the Belgian league's decision on Thursday to abandon its competition and declare leaders Club Brugge as champions.



Eintracht Frankfurt's Diibril Sow during a training session at the Kleine Kampfbahn Training Ground in Frankfurt, Germany on Friday, Football events in Germany have been suspended due to Covid-19 fears.

### Men's age limit extended by a year for Tokyo Olympics

**ASSOCIATED PRESS** GENEVA, APRIL 4

FIFA has extended the age limit for the men's football tournament at the rescheduled Tokyo Olympics due to

the coronavirus pandemic. The amended Olympic rule on Friday retains the "players born on or after January 1, 1997" standard for the Tokyo Games following a one-year postponement agreed last week by the International Olympic Committee and Japanese authorities. It means players eligible for the intended under-23 tournament in 2020 can still play in Japan at age 24 next year. Men's soccer kicks off ahead of the July 23, 2021 opening ceremony in Tokyo.

FIFA also postponed two women's age-group World Cups due this year in Central America and India, and confirmed no international games for men and women will be played in the early June dates protected for national

team callups. Football's world body said "health must always be the first priority and the main criteria in any decision-making process, especially in these challenging times.'

The Olympic decision was made by a FIFA panel of football officials worldwide, created to address the game shutdown during the health crisis. The 16 men's teams at the Tokyo Olympics next year can also select three over-age players in their rosters. A stellar lineup includes Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany and Spain.

Two women's World Cup tournaments-the Under-20s hosted by Panama and Costa Rica in August and September, and the Under-17s in India in November-are postponed. No new dates were announced.

Until the Covid-19 outbreak, national team games scheduled in June included the 2020 European Championship, World Cup qualifying

games in South America and Asia, and qualifiers for the 2021 Africa Cup of Nations.

After Euro 2020 was postponed for one year, UEFA hoped to schedule playoff games in June to confirm the last four places in a 24-nation lineup. Those playoffs were postponed indefinitely this week.

World Cup qualifiers for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar now face uncertain scheduling in a congested calendar in Europe, South America and Asia. FIFA said on Friday it would "organize bilateral discussions" with continental governing bodies "to finalize a revised match schedule pending health and safety developments."

FIFA plans to direct hundreds of millions of dollars from its cash reserves to support a global emergency fund, and has agreed to appoint one official from each of the six soccer continents to coordinate the work

### England cricketers donate, take pay cuts amid Covid-19 shutdown

**REUTERS** 

England's centrally contracted male cricketers will donate 500,000 pounds (\$613,000) to the Board and charities while their women's team counterparts have volunteered a three-month pay cut amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the players' association (PCA) said.

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) has said the season will not start before May 28 and speculation has been mounting over how their leading players would respond to the situation.

"Following a meeting today of all of the England men's centrally contracted cricketers, the players have agreed to make an initial donation of £0.5m to the ECB and to selected good causes ..." the Professional Cricketers' Association said in a statement on

"This contribution is the equivalent of all of the England centrally contracted players taking a 20% reduction in their monthly retainers for the next three months. The players will continue to discuss with the ECB the challenging situation faced by the game and society as a whole and will consider how best to support the ECB and both the cricketing and wider community going forward.

The ECB's centrally contracted women players have volunteered to take a salary reduction for the months of April, May and June in line with their coaches and support staff. England women's captain Heather Knight said: "All the players felt like it was the right response in the current climate to take a pay cut in line with what our support staff are

"We know how the current situation is affecting the game and we want to help as much as we can. We will be discussing with the ECB further ways we can help the game in the coming weeks," added Knight, who has signed up with the National Health Service (NHS) as a volunteer.

The ECB has announced a 61 million pounds aid package to help the local game withstand the financial impact of the pandemic. Wicketkeeperbatsman Jos Buttler is currently auctioning the shirt he wore in England's 2019 World Cup final victory to raise funds for efforts to fight the

### Football season kicks off in coronavirus-free Tajikistan

Tajikistan's domestic football season is kicking off on schedule despite almost every other football league around the globe having ground to a halt due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The clubs in the landlocked Central Asian country of nine million people are largely unknown, even among the world's most ardent football fans. But the Super Cup clash between champions Istiklol and league runners-up Khujand on Saturday could bring some solace to football fanatics this weekend with bookmakers already offering a variety of bets and even live streams of the game.

Football has survived in only a few countries around the world with matches from less glamorous leagues in Belarus, Nicaragua and Burundi helping action-starved fans to break their boredom. The Belarus Football Federation has already got deals with sports networks in more than 10 countries, including Russia, Israel, India and even Bulgaria. The Tajikistan pre-season curtain

raiser will be played behind closed

doors at the Central Republican

Stadium in the capital Dushanbe. The

World Health Organization has warned that people should avoid crowds, although the ex-Soviet Union state has not announced a single case of coronavirus infection. "You know that the championships are stopped in almost all countries because of the coronavirus pandemic," the Dushanbe-based Istiklol manager Vitaliy Levchenko told a news conference on the eve of the Super

Cup clash. "Thank God, there is no

coronavirus in Tajikistan and the new football season begins in the country." Istiklol won a domestic treble in 2019 and became the first club to win six Tajik League titles in a row. Tajikistan, whose national sport is gushtigiri, a form of traditional wrestling, have never reached a World Cup or Asian Cup finals, their best achievement coming in 2006 when they won the Asian Challenge Cup—an emerg-

ing countries competition. No Tajik club have reached the Asian Champions League group stages either, with Istiklol beaten by Saudi Arabia's Al-Ahli in the competition's West Region playoff round in January. A Tajik Football Federation (FFT) official told Reuters it hopes the populari-



Khuiand's coach Nikola Lazarevic.

ty of the league grows in the coming weeks and would gladly discuss offers for broadcasting deals with sports networks in foreign countries. "But it's too early to say something concrete,' he said. "The league season starts on Sunday, let's see what will happen."

The networks broadcasting Tajikistan matches are Varzish TV, a state-owned sports channel, and TFF Futbol, owned by the domestic federation. The 10-team league kicks off on Sunday with three games, which will also be played behind closed doors. The clubs will rely on 42 foreign players, with neighbouring Uzbekistan topping the list with 20 imports followed by Ghana with 10.

"My soul is anxious, I worry bout my compatriots, my family and my relatives," said Khujand's Uzbekistan keeper Mamur Ikramov. "You know that there are 205 coronavirus cases in Uzbekistan." The coaches of the two teams defended the Tajic federation's decision for the Super Cup to be played

without spectators. "I believe that playing in empty stands should not affect the match,'

Levchenko said. "I would like to appeal to the fans so that they have patience. At least the championship starts here, and in other countries the fans are complete-

ly deprived of football." "We understand the situation in the world with the coronavirus and we fully support the FFT decision,' Khujand's Serbian coach Nikola Lazarevic told reporters. "This is how we protect our health."

CULTURE & ARTS

### Can computers replace classrooms?

As a result of the nation-wide lockdown, colleges have rolled out online classes. But their effectiveness is questionable in a country where traditional pedagogy approaches are still highly practised.

ANKIT KHADGI & ADITI ARYAL

Pragya Joshi didn't think much when her teachers told her her classes would now be held virtually. As even during regular classes, professors would use slides and students would mostly read related articles online, the decision to go digital to continue teaching during the lockdown didn't make her uncomfortable.

But the 24-year-old master's student at Kathmandu University's School of Arts didn't expect the switch online to be so drastic and how it severely limited interactivity.

"In class, the teachers could demonstrate and make us understand the subject matter and ask questions. But now the classes aren't as interactive because of the technology barrier, because we can't interact the way we could in physical classes," said Joshi, who has been signing up for two-hour classes for a week.

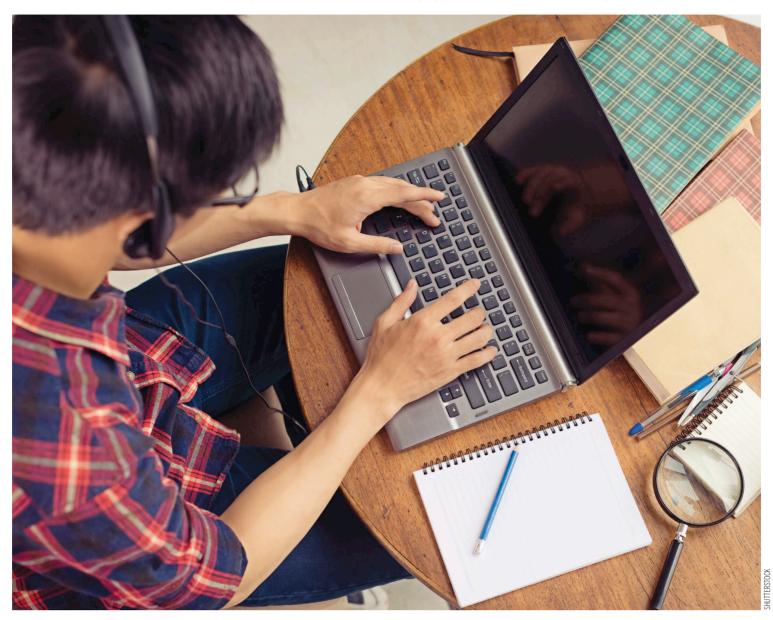
As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to unfold, universities and schools around the world have opted for virtual classes in an effort to continue with their curricula while maintaining social distancing.

Nepali colleges and universities are making the switch too. However, the effectiveness of virtual classes in Nepal remains questionable, given that traditional pedagogical practises are still a major part of Nepali academic institutions.

According to Chandiraj Dahal, assistant professor of media studies at the Kathmandu University School of Arts, face-to-face interactions are always more effective than mediated communication, such as using internet technologies.

"As a teacher, mediated communication is not my first choice, but given the situation, I would definitely agree that virtual classrooms have much to offer and have diminished physical barriers," said Dahal.

After the government declared a lockdown on March 24, the School of Arts introduced an online learning management system, providing a platform for students and professors to share learning materials and even assign and evaluate assignments.



"We have been using platforms like Google Meet, as it's more apt for conducting classes of 25-30 students at a time," said Dahal. "The application allows us to share our screen and make slide presentations as well but most importantly, it allows teachers or presenters to host and control the microphones of other members. Such features make the virtual room as effective as a real classroom, and it seems to be working as we are attracting

hundred percent attendance."
A number of other institutions of higher learning have also intro-

duced virtual classes, and are reporting better attendance rates.

"Initially, we were apprehensive regarding the turnout but the attendance for every session is almost 90 percent," said Sandesh Karmacharya, manager of MBA at ACE Institute of Management, which has been operating online MBA classes for about three weeks

However, online classes don't always work well, especially when internet connectivity isn't stable, leading students to miss out on lectures and discussions. "Although we try to attend all classes, many of my classmates are unable to access lectures because of internet connectivity problems," said Sumina Pradhan, an MBA student at Boston International College in Chitwan.

Pratibha Pant, a second year student at National College in Kathmandu, shared similar sentiments.

"Some classes for students in the first and fourth years are being held online via Google Meet. However, this option has been contested by many students in my year who have returned to their villages due to the lockdown and stable internet is unavailable," she said.

As faster internet connections remain a luxury, students from underprivileged families do not have equal access, and when they do, they may not have an easy experience online. According to research from Columbia University, students from marginalised families struggle more in online classes.

Another major challenge is the possibility of distraction during

Online education isn't for everyone though, due to issues of power and connectivity.

virtual classes. As students may not have strict disciplinary codes of conduct, like they have in a traditional setting, chances are there that they might use their phones or get easily distracted. Research suggests that students in online courses are more likely to be distracted and have a propensity to use social media more than those attending physical classes.

Dahal acknowledges online education is not for everyone, due to issues of connectivity, bandwidth and power supply. But he believes that in this situation, it is the best option for students to continue their education.

"We aren't trying to burden them, he said. "The intention is to spread hope that things will be alright soon. I believe continuing with studies is one way students can realise that crises are inevitable in our society."

And some students agree.

"My days aren't being wasted. I have been spending my time reading and writing my assignments. The classes are fruitful and they provide a distraction from the overwhelming situation," said Joshi.

Schools too are using online tools to keep students engaged. Ullens School in Kathmandu has been conducting online classes for its IB students, while Modern Indian School is using social media to stay connected with its students.

"Through WhatsApp groups, teachers have been assigning students one assignment per subject daily," said Geeta Dhungel, who teaches Nepali at Modern Indian School. "Besides helping us stay connected to students, online apps have also been helpful in sharing examination results and other important announcements and decisions with parents," she added.

#### FICTION PARK



### The choice Mrs Shrestha made

#### INDU MANI CHEMJONG

the Shrestha household. Mrs Shrestha woke up earlier than the others for some quiet time for herself. But unlike most days, she didn't feel calm in spite of the stillness of the morning. This morning, her mind was racing and she felt she had lost her centre. She decided to make herself a cup of tea, but so far away was her mind that the boiling milk spilled over, which added to her agitation.

It was an ordinary morning at

She started questioning herself. Like millions around the world, who are going through anxious spells due to Covid-19, was she too getting confused and worried? Or was it her unexpressed dissatisfaction over her relationship with her husband or the in-laws? Or was it her age that was catching up? She had surely gotten up on the wrong side of the bed, as she wasn't the kind to be quiet and carry on with the day's chores in such silence.

Because Mrs Shrestha is usually full of life. She's the kind of lady who always has something interesting to talk about, and is full of new, exciting ideas. A people person through and through, there's never a dull moment with her around. Her buoyancy of life and the radiance of her personality always shines through on any normal given day.

But this morning, she was extraordinarily quiet, and in complete silence, she made her tea. One could even be mistaken that she had decided to practice mindfulness and treat her daily tea-making as a sacred ceremony. There were certain rituals that she practiced in the early morning hours. Being the lady of the household, she would start making the day's menu well before breakfast time. She would decide whether to do the laundry or not or what tasks the part-time maid would do on that day and a whole

She's the kind of lady who always has something interesting to talk about.

lot of other tasks that needed to be completed around the house.

But this morning, it was different. She even did not ask her husband if he would like to be served his bed tea or not. Her thoughts were elsewhere, where exactly she did not know, and even drawing her mental to-do list seemed so hard.

She called out her helper boy and mumbled some lines, "People should try to be as positive as possible from the inside as the external situation isn't that bright." The poor boy didn't understand what she said.

Call it sixth sense, call it premonition, Mrs Shrestha sensed some impending doom in the air. Just then came the announcement of a nation-wide lockdown.

A lockdown would mean no movement and restrictions of all sorts. She had seen many strikes and bandhs in the country but this was different. The coronavirus has come to surface as a deadly enemy that has not only made thousands sick but has taken lives as well. The problem is that there is still no cure for it and it's extremely contagious and the news of how the virus is spreading is enough to frighten appears.

Millions have lost their jobs, children can't go to school, people can't socialise. There's fear everywhere. Like the rest of the world, she too, was feeling extremely anxious but nevertheless, she decided to do her usual morning pooja. The chandan incense permeated her entire pooja room and the light from the

'diya' seemed greatly comforting to her. She prayed and prayed and when she came out, she seemed calmer and relaxed. Suddenly her low spirits seemed to have been toned down and had been replaced by rays of hope. The coronavirus had turned the whole world upside down and she knew that the world would never be the same again but she was now ready to face the world.

She took a quick shower and decided to don a bright top with her favourite trousers. She dabbed on some perfume on her wrists, put on some lipstick and went downstairs. She instructed the cook on what to prepare for breakfast and lunch that day. She walked out of the kitchen, with her shoulders strong, confident and ready to brace what was to come. She fancied herself as a commander leading her battalion on the battle ground. She decided to take a stroll in the garden.

She had always acknowledged the fact that a human is partly physical and partly spiritual This morning she told herself that she too had an indomitable spirit and that she stood ready to take on what might come. She knew that her state of mind was in her own hands and it was up to her to set the compass. She decided that she'd focus on the positive. She would use this time to do some spring cleaning around the house. She could learn about past pandemics, plagues and outbreaks from the pages of history and see how civilisations came out triumphant at the end and she could catch up on her journal writing. Suddenly, great ideas started flooding her mind!

The smart and sensible woman that she was, Mrs Shrestha knew the power of choices. So that morning when there was an announcement on the national television about the lockdown in the country, she chose to be happy and full of gratitude for the precious gift that life was.

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