



# THE KATHMANDU POST

WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

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37.2° C 6.3° C  
Dhangadi Jumba



Freshly planted rice terraces in Dhading. Despite the nationwide lockdown enforced to stem the spread of Covid-19, farmers are carrying on with agricultural activities in ways that are possible.

POST PHOTO: PRAKASH CHANDRA TIMLASENA

## With 14 new cases, Nepal's Covid-19 tally doubles in a single day

Twelve cases in Udayapur and two in Chitwan mark a sharp rise in Covid-19 infections, bringing country's total to 30.

ARJUN POUDEL  
KATHMANDU, APRIL 17

Fourteen new Covid-19 cases were confirmed on Friday in Udayapur and Chitwan districts, nearly doubling Nepal's tally to 30.

According to the Health Ministry, 12 Covid-19 cases were confirmed in Udayapur and two in Chitwan via the polymerase chain reaction method.

Of the 14 new patients from both districts, 13 are males between the ages of 20 and 40 while one is a 63-year-old woman.

An official at the Health Ministry said that among the 12 patients infected with the coronavirus in Udayapur, a majority are Indian nationals. Their samples were first tested in Birgunj on Thursday.

After they showed positive results, the samples were dispatched to the National Public Health Laboratory in Kathmandu, which confirmed the presence of the coronavirus.

All 12 patients had been residing in a mosque, according to Dr Basudev Pandey, director of the Epidemiology and Disease Control Division.

Samples of two patients, a mother and son, from Chitwan were also tested and confirmed at the National Public Health laboratory. The duo had returned home from the United Kingdom, according to Pandey.

Dipak Kumar Pahadi, the Udayapur Chief District Officer, said that preliminary information showed that the 12 patients had all arrived in Udayapur from Biratnagar via Saptari. They are believed to have visited Bodebarsain Municipality in Saptari to participate in a religious conference held on February 15-17, he said.

Police have meanwhile cordoned off the mosque and the surrounding areas, and restricted people's movement.

"We are planning to seal the area

and send the patients to the isolation ward at Koshi Hospital," said Pahadi.

Public health experts said that the virus could have spread to nearby communities and stressed active case finding, which has not yet started.

"We can assume that the disease has spread in the community at some level by the pattern in which it has spread in countries across the globe," Dr Anup Subedee, a consultant infectious disease physician, told the Post. "We have to strengthen our surveillance system and start active case finding."

The government has not yet started active case finding, which entails testing all suspects, including those with symptoms of Covid-19 and randomised testing at the community level.

The Health Ministry had earlier decided to mobilise female community health volunteers to look for possible coronavirus patients but due to the indecision of the government to start active case finding, these volunteers have not been able to report cases of fever and persistent cough to higher authorities.

"Active case finding must be started immediately," said Subedee. "Otherwise, we cannot control the outbreak. We don't have much time."

Positive results on the rapid diagnostic test but not on the polymerase chain reaction method confirms that more people have already contracted the virus, say doctors.

"Those infected might have passed it on to others before getting cured," Dr Baburam Marasini, former director of the Epidemiology and Disease Control Division, told the Post. "Every policymaker and expert in the Health Ministry knows this, but has not bothered to start active case findings."

Dilli Ram Khatiwada contributed reporting from Udayapur.

## Government deal to procure medical equipment via three private companies raises questions over Nepal Army's role

Health department officials say they were unable to wait any longer for the Army to procure urgently required supplies.

ANIL GIRI & BINOD GHIMIRE  
KATHMANDU, APRIL 17

Two weeks since the Nepal Army was mandated to procure medical equipment needed to fight Covid-19 through a government-to-government deal, the national defence force has yet to make any progress. Private companies meanwhile are preparing to bring in medical equipment within a week's time, according to the Department of Health Services.

After an earlier decision to award a

contract to procure medical equipment to a private company ran into controversy, with two Cabinet ministers accused of corruption, the government had asked the Nepal Army to do the job.

But two weeks later, the Army has yet to bring in the first consignment. And the government has now signed agreements with three private firms to import emergency medical supplies, including personal protective equipment, N95 masks and gloves, raising questions as to why the gov-

ernment assigned the Army in the first place.

Officials at the Department of Health Services said that since several government hospitals are either running out or facing an acute shortage of medical equipment, the Health Ministry was under pressure, as the country has started seeing a rise in the number of Covid-19 cases. A senior official at the department told the Post that the deals with the private firms were signed on short notice, after the Army failed to import the

medical equipment even after weeks.

The department on Thursday signed three separate agreements with Om Surgical, Hamro Medi Concern and Lumbini Health Care to import the medical goods.

"We are aware of the past controversy so we met all requirements while handing over the responsibility for importing the medical goods to private firms," said Mahendra Bahadur Shrestha, director-general of the Department of Health Services.

>> Continued on page 4

## The lockdown is turning people into couch potatoes

Stuck inside home, many are spending hours on the couch and in front of screens, increasing the risk of various health issues.

ELISHA SHRESTHA  
KATHMANDU, APRIL 17

Ever since the lockdown was implemented, Hari Shakya hasn't left his home unless it's for something essential, such as getting medicine for his diabetes or for food. At home, the 50-year-old spends most of his time in front of the laptop, working from home or watching movies. When he is not in front of the computer, he is on the couch, either eating or watching television.

For the past three weeks, Shakya's daily routine has become pretty much the same: spending excessive amounts of time lying down, moving from bed to desk to couch. Only recently has Shakya started to realise that being stuck at home might be taking a toll on his health.

"Every morning, before

heading to work, I used to go for a walk," he said. "However, the pandemic and the confinement measures have disrupted my routine and, unknowingly, I have turned into a couch potato. As a result, I've been suffering from constipation."

The Covid-19 pandemic has thrown everyone's life into disarray, and as a means to control the spread of the disease, the public has been requested to stay at home. But being stuck at home for prolonged periods of time has not only disrupted lives and schedules but also given rise to sedentary behaviours. As a result, doctors are concerned about the negative effects that low levels of physical activity and a sedentary lifestyle can have on the health and well-being of individuals.

>> 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.

### 6 Preventive measures

- 1. Wash your hands thoroughly**  
Wash your hands with soap and water thoroughly at least for 20 seconds after touching a suspected contaminated surface.
- 2. Cover your mouth**  
Cover your mouth with masks while coughing or while being with someone who is coughing. Avoid reusing masks. Change it constantly. Discard your masks properly in a dustbin.
- 3. Avoid sharing/using personal items**  
Don't share your personal items like pens, mouse and digital devices and avoid using those used by others.
- 4. Avoid touching your eyes, ears and nose**  
The virus can enter your body easily when you touch your eyes, ears and nose quite often, as it usually can remain in these places for a longer period of time.
- 5. Avoid crowds**  
Don't be at big gatherings as much as possible. Since the possibility of virus transmission from one person to another is so high, crowds should be avoided as much as possible.
- 6. Don't hesitate to seek medical advice**  
If you have a fever or flu-like symptoms, immediately consult your doctor. Seek medical advice and follow your doctor's advice.

### General Symptoms

- Dry Cough
- Fever
- Shortness of Breath
- Headache
- Confusion
- Sore Throat

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# MEDLEY

## Inside the Post

### National

Hundreds of Nepali workers are likely to be deprived from the general amnesty scheme announced by the Kuwait government to illegal expatriates. The scheme exempts illegal immigrants from the penalty of overstaying in Kuwait and also offers free air tickets if residency rule violators agree to join the amnesty.

### Money

Debt-ridden Nepal Airlines is pleading with the Civil Aviation Ministry to help save it from going under amid Covid-19 losses. The airlines has written to its line ministry asking for a complete waiver of interest on its loans for six months.

### World

At least 50 percent more people died in China's virus epicenter of Wuhan than previously counted, with state media on Friday attributing the initial undercount to how overwhelmed the health system was coping with thousands of sick patients.

### Sports

La Liga has been on hold since March 10 due to the pandemic although president Javier Tebas has said matches could start up again on either May 29, June 7 or June 28, most likely without spectators.

### Books

Sudheer Sharma's 'The Nepal Nexus: An Inside Account of the Maoists, the Durbar and New Delhi (2019)' reinforces Kubrick's almost epitaph: "The great nations have always acted like gangsters, and the small nations like prostitutes."

## News Quiz

- Which country has used the Covid-19 pandemic as a cover-up to expel Nepali migrant workers according to Amnesty International?
  - Saudi Arabia
  - Oman
  - Bahrain
  - Qatar
- Which of the following movies is directed by Bong joon-ho?
  - Train To Busan
  - Snowpiercer
  - The Handmaiden
  - The Man from Nowhere
- A 99-year-old World War II veteran of which country has raised a fund of more than \$15 million for healthcare staff?
  - England
  - France
  - Russia
  - America
- What amount of revenue was collected at the Birgunj Integrated Check Post between March 14 and April 11?
  - Rs15.67 billion
  - Rs10.88 billion
  - Rs5.36 billion
  - Rs 3.28 billion
- Hit by the global coronavirus crisis, how many of the Formula 1 races have been cancelled so far?
  - 10
  - 9
  - 7
  - 6
- Image of uprising from which African country won the prestigious World Press Photo of the Year Award?
  - Sudan
  - Nigeria
  - Chad
  - Cameroon



A man transports food items on a cycle at Satdobato, Lalitpur, on the 25th day of the nationwide lockdown on Friday.

POST PHOTO: ELITE JOSHI

## On this day in history

### European bank sought for spending details

LONDON – The 56 countries and international agencies which own the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) have asked the bank for a detailed breakdown of how it spent 55.5 million pounds (83.25 million dollars) on furnishing and equipping its offices, a press report said on Saturday.

The 23 directors of the bank, which represent these countries and agencies, have also asked for proof that "proper procurement policies" were followed and that the bank received the best prices for the construction, the Financial Times reported.

EBRD President Jacques Attali and the bank have been the target of outrage in Britain this week as a result of reports that the bank had spent twice as much on establishing itself as on funding development projects in eastern Europe.

The Kathmandu Post  
April 18, 1993

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

## Quote of the day

Government deal to procure medical equipment via three private companies raises questions over Nepal Army's role, Page 1

"We are aware of the past controversy so we met all requirements while handing over the responsibility for importing the medical goods to private firms."

Mahendra Bahadur Shrestha, director-general of the Department of Health Services, on contracting private firms to import medical equipment.

## Most read online

### Qatar used coronavirus pandemic as a ruse to expel Nepali migrant workers, Amnesty International says

The Qatari authorities used the global health pandemic of Covid-19 as a cover-up to expel Nepali migrant workers illegally, according to Amnesty International. The human rights advocacy group has accused the Qatari authorities of rounding and expelling dozens of migrant workers after telling them that they were being taken to be tested for Covid-19 in March.

### Many in Kathmandu Valley can neither stay here nor go home

There have been numerous reports of people leaving the Kathmandu valley in droves to get back to their homes. Without public transportation, many are making journeys that are hundreds of kilometres long on foot. Images have appeared on social media of people carrying babies, clad only in slippers, and laden with possessions, all walking home.

### Government takes decisions unrelated to Covid-19, drawing criticism from all quarters

After the medical equipment purchase fiasco earlier this month, the KP Sharma Oli administration decided to terminate a deal with a private company and bring in the Nepal Army to do the job. It has been two weeks since the national defence force was entrusted with the task of signing a government-to-government deal to import medical equipment to fight the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Nepal Army contacting people who bought SIM cards recently

The Covid-19 Crisis Management Centre under Nepal Army has started contacting people who have bought new SIM cards recently to track people who may have returned home from abroad recently. A team of 20 army personnel have been assigned to call up people who recently bought SIM cards.

## 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](mailto:kpost@kmg.com.np) with "correction" in the subject line.

For the most recent corrections, visit [kathmandupost.com/corrections](http://kathmandupost.com/corrections).

## HOROSCOPE

### ARIES (March 21-April 19)

\*\*\*  
Today should be a good day, so why not go outdoors and enjoy some fresh air? Wide-open spaces will help to open your mind and freshen your attitude about an issue that has been frustrating you lately. All that oxygen will give you new ideas, and it might even help you think up a few new ideas.

### CANCER (June 22-July 22)

\*\*\*  
Your co-workers are in your life to help you in your career, not your personal life. Be very wary of the relationships that veer away from professional and into private. This isn't to say that you can never be friends (or even more than friends) with a co-worker. You can. But you need to be mindful of the difference.

### LIBRA (September 23-October 22)

\*\*\*  
It's been quite a while since you pursued something purely for its intellectual value, so why not work on that? You'll have plenty of opportunities to do so. Smart people are ready to talk, and they're ready to talk about some very interesting topics that you've been wondering about yourself.

### CAPRICORN (December 22-January 19)

\*\*  
The idealistic side of you will engage in battle with your more jaded other half when you're stuck between doing what is right and what you know is good enough. Will you help build your reputation as someone who always gets things done right or as who gets things done fast but sometimes has to go back and fix a few things?

### TAURUS (April 20-May 20)

\*\*\*\*  
Today it could really open a lot of exciting doors for you, especially if you're going to be dealing with people from other cultures. Sure, there might be a little bit of a communication gap initially, but you'll have a way of overcoming it with a smile. You're in an excellent position to affect your travel in the future.

### LEO (July 23-August 22)

\*\*\*  
Something has ignited your wanderlust, whether it's a book or article you just read, foreign film you just saw, or travel website you just found. Planning your next vacation is a great way to spend whatever free time you have, although this may not be the best time for it.

### SCORPIO (October 23-November 21)

\*\*  
Are you getting too focused on immediate gratification right now? Do you really have to have whatever it is right this instant? It's important to practice patience and learn the value of saving up for something you want to buy for yourself in the future. Delayed gratification is where it's at.

### AQUARIUS (January 20-February 18)

\*\*\*\*  
If one or two social connections are fading away, don't worry about it. Just because you haven't seen them in a while doesn't mean that you can't call them up to chat or even ask for some advice. The relationships you've built are based on respect, and these people respect you. They'd love to hear from you!

### GEMINI (May 21-June 21)

\*\*\*  
You're to be commended for trying to see things from all possible angles. Your gift for compassion and empathy is unusual, and it has helped earn you a reputation for being fair and considerate. But right now, you might need to stop looking at all the angles in order to act more quickly.

### VIRGO (August 23-September 22)

\*\*\*\*  
If your patience for a fickle friend is running thin, contact them today and let them know that you aren't going to stand for this much longer. You might have to force yourself to be this direct, but being vague or beating around the bush will only give them permission to continue their erratic behavior.

### SAGITTARIUS (November 22-December 21)

\*\*\*\*  
You might not think that you can compromise what you want in order to meet someone else's demands right now, but you're wrong. Try harder to let your generosity do the negotiating. Put yourself in their position, and you'll suddenly be a lot more sensitive to what they're asking for.

### PISCES (February 19-March 20)

\*\*\*  
Today a sweet gift may land right in your lap, and it might seem like there are no strings attached. But look more closely. Pay attention to how the person who gave you the gift is acting. Do they expect something from you in return? Does accepting the gift make you complicit in something that you're not comfortable with?

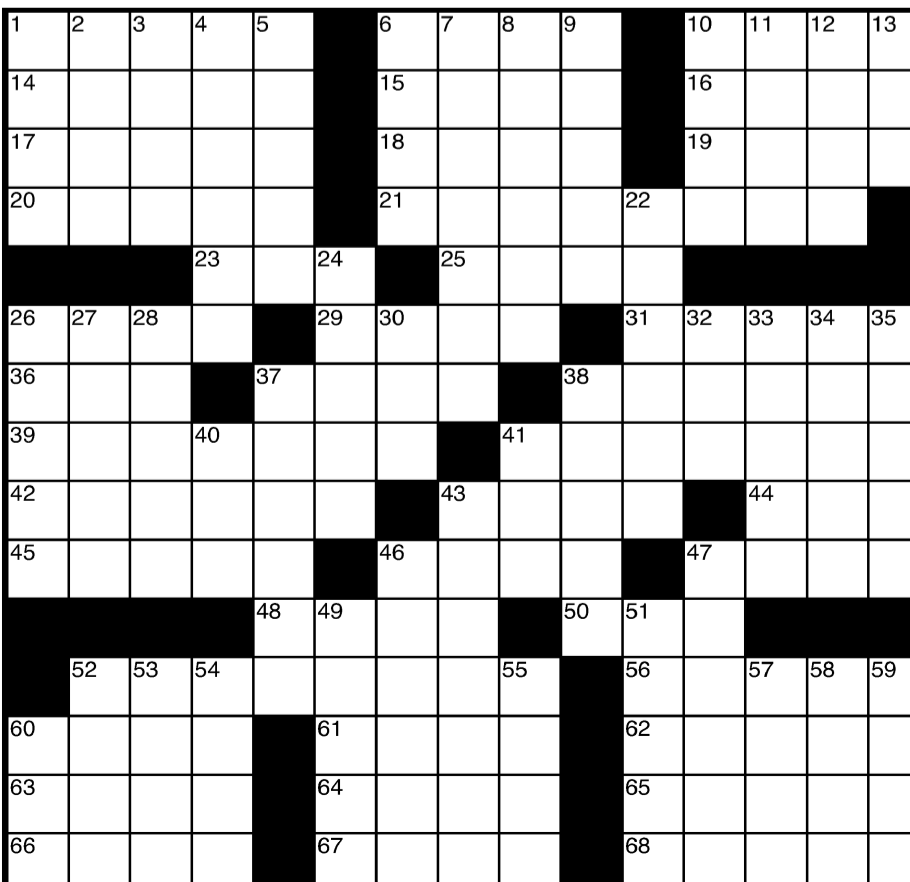
## CROSSWORD

- ACROSS**
- Pitches in
  - Contrived horseplay
  - Pasternak heroine
  - Separate
  - Cry from the sky
  - Poet's black
  - Radio, TV, etc.
  - vera lotion
  - Unisex garment
  - Like fleabag hotels
  - Audacity
  - Spanish "that"
  - Solar plexus
  - Blocks
  - Talks fondly
  - Margarita garnishes
  - Citrus cooler
  - Formal
  - Tough and wiry
  - Anxiety
  - Come back in
  - Secure
  - Modern-speed unit
  - "Exodus" hero
  - Wildlife shelters
  - Dads
  - Ms. Lanchester
  - Big laugh (hyph.)
  - Opposite of norte
  - Gourd
  - Aristocrat
  - Romantic island
  - Italian wine city
  - Like some showers
  - Sts.
  - Place-kick props
  - Cake topper
  - Go off the — end
  - Screws things up
  - Backslide
  - Grocery buys
  - Fencing weapon
  - Fill the hull
  - Lion families
  - Remains
  - Horned beast of the zodiac
  - Airplane part
  - Trolls
  - Clay-target sport
  - Name in blue jeans
  - Be a party to
  - Promising
  - Diligent insect
  - Depended on
  - Oak-to-be
  - Breakfast item
  - Unfired brick
  - Lets property
  - Possess
  - Motor lodge
  - Bronze, for one
  - Big pitchers
  - Lebanon neighbor
  - Kyoto entertainer
  - Grinch creator
  - Household member
  - Kind of sheet
  - Loudmouth
  - Sci-fi weapon
  - Beethoven's Third
  - Subside
  - Before
  - Stalactite site
  - Helm position
  - Not speak clearly
  - Whisper loudly
  - Brief upturn
  - Eye part
  - Verge
  - Follow-up to the "Thriller" album

### PREVIOUS PUZZLE SOLVED



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## SUDOKU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION



DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆

# Illegal Nepalis in Kuwait could be deprived of amnesty as Nepal is under lockdown

Kuwait has offered a general amnesty for undocumented workers, allowing them to leave the country without costs.

CHANDAN KUMAR MANDAL  
KATHMANDU, APRIL 17

Hundreds of Nepali workers are likely to be deprived of the general amnesty scheme announced by the Kuwait government to illegal expatriates.

The scheme exempts illegal immigrants from the penalty of overstaying in Kuwait and also offers free air tickets if residency rule violators agree to join the amnesty.

However, there is an uncertainty regarding illegal Nepali workers benefiting from the amnesty, as their home country remains under lockdown at least until April 27 and incoming international flights suspended till April 30.

According to Kuwaiti government estimates, 7,000 Nepalis are either undocumented or have overstayed in Kuwait.

"Unlike previous amnesties, the current one is a unique one as those leaving the country can come back again later and will not have to bear any fines for breaching the visa rules. Also, Nepal doesn't have to send any flights since the Kuwaiti government will be chartering the flight to send back the undocumented and overstaying expatriates," said Suraj Maskey, a Nepali migrant worker from Kuwait. "However, it looks like Nepalis cannot utilise the amnesty as lockdown and banning of international flights is still on. The government, including the labour minister, has said Nepali workers could not be brought home from Gulf countries."

Kuwaiti government's general pardon has come in the light of the exceptional circumstances when the Gulf country is going through a tough time trying to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus in the country.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic has engulfed the world, Nepali migrant workers have been languishing in various labour destination countries, mainly in the Gulf states, Malaysia and South Korea.

The general amnesty will benefit expatriates who do not have valid residency permits or have overstayed in the country. The scheme, in place from April 1 to April 30, allows illegal immigrants to leave the country without paying any fines and also allows re-entry later with valid documents. According to Kuwaiti authorities, airlines will be allowed to operate outbound flights from Kuwait to several destinations to ferry these illegal immigrants.

Separate time-frames have been set for undocumented expats from various countries to apply for the amnesty programme. Immigrants from the Philippines could apply from April 1-5 and Egyptians from April 6-10, while Bangladeshi can apply from April 11-15, Indians from April 16-20, Sri Lankans from April 21-25 and other nationalities, including Nepali workers, from April 26-30. The Arab nation hosts over 70,000 Nepali migrant workers.

According to Suman Ghimire, a spokesperson with the Labour Ministry, Nepali embassy in Kuwait has been facilitating Nepali citizens to make use of the scheme.

"The time slot offered for various countries is for registration. So there will be time for repatriation," said Ghimire.

According to Maskey, nearly 3,000 Nepalis are estimated to join the general amnesty.

"The Nepal Embassy has said that they will be on the ground during the registration process so that Nepali workers do not have to visit the embassy for completing other procedures," said Maskey. "However, there is no formal notice from them as of now and there is not much time left. Also, these workers will not be sent back haphazardly but only after proper testing here."

The Non-Resident Nepali Association (NRNA) Kuwait Chapter, in its statement, had drawn the attention of the Nepal embassy in Kuwait to prioritise the return of those Nepalis who have been languishing due to the lockdown over those who have regular jobs.

Nepal diaspora group has said the Nepal government asking Nepali citizens abroad to stay safe wherever they are at this time might sound logical for documented workers, but spells trouble for undocumented Nepalis, as they could be liable to legal actions once the amnesty period is over.

"Regular workers like me will get back to work once the crisis is over. But the opportunity like the amnesty will not come again for illegal workers," said Maskey, who is also an honorary member of NRNA International Coordination Council. "Nepal has recently accelerated rapid tests and there is a slim chance of lockdown ending anytime soon. Even if the lockdown and travel restrictions are in place, Nepal should take back these workers and keep them in quarantine."



Army personnel in protective gear decontaminate themselves with disinfectants as part of a drill for Covid-19 response at the Nepal Army Ranger Regiment in Chhauni, Kathmandu, on Friday. POST PHOTO: ANISH REGMI

## Oli directs high-level Covid-19 committee to strictly implement stay-at-home order

Home Ministry to stop people walking long distances wherever they are, and send them to the nearest quarantine.

TIKA R PRADHAN  
KATHMANDU, APRIL 17

Hours after the Supreme Court ordered officials to ensure that people going home by walking long distances get free transportation, the government has decided not to allow people to move from one place to another on foot.

During a meeting with members of the High-level Coordination Committee to combat Covid-19 and the Covid Crisis Management Centre in Baluwatar on Friday, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli directed authorities to implement the lockdown to contain the outbreak "more strictly".

"During today's meeting the prime minister directed all to strictly imple-

ment the lockdown," said Law Minister Shiva Maya following the meeting. "The local governments concerned will arrange necessary food and shelter wherever people heading home have reached."

Foreign Minister Pradip Gyawali, who also attended the meeting, said that the home ministry will send people heading home to the nearest quarantine and keep them there safe in cooperation with the provincial and concerned local governments.

"To stop people from heading home on foot, the home ministry will make provisions for food and shelter," said Gyawali.

However, sources at the home ministry told the Post that the government will try to send stranded people

The committee meeting concluded that government's response so far has been satisfactory.

to their city/ village wherever possible.

"As there could be protests from local governments, the government has not taken a concrete decision. But the understanding is to ensure those going on foot reach their local level (municipalities) safely," said a home ministry official.

Today's meeting concluded that the government's response to the global coronavirus outbreak has been satisfactory, and therefore the lockdown should be strictly implemented, especially after 14 cases were reported in the country on Friday alone. Prime Minister Oli is learnt to have told members of the committee that various people have been plotting to show that the government has failed to manage the crisis.

During the course of the meeting, the prime minister also briefed committee members about his discussions with officials from countries including India where Nepalis remain stranded.

According to Gyawali, the government has also started observing the situation of the Nepalis living abroad.

## Becoming enterprising when businesses are shut

Some people in Kathmandu have started to sell vegetables to keep their income rolling during the lockdown.

ANUP OJHA  
KATHMANDU, APRIL 17

Until last month, Dhan Bahadur Gurung had a hectic schedule. His small restaurant in Kupondole would see a steady flow of customers from as early as nine in the morning. By the time he closed, it used to be around 10pm. Then suddenly came the lockdown, beginning March 24.

"It meant a complete restriction of movement and gathering of people. And mine is a business where people sit together, eat and drink," he said.

Gurung was forced to pull the shutters of his restaurant, MoMo Mania, like thousands of other eateries in the Valley.

"I was out of business," said the 46-year-old from Dhading. His two employees had nothing to do.

After a week at home with no work, he started getting restless.

Gurung then realised that there are certain essential things that people cannot do without, for example vegetables.

"Earlier I used to go to the Balkhu vegetable market to buy what I needed for my restaurant. Now I bring vegetables in bulk," said Gurung.

For the last two weeks, Gurung visits the Balkhu vegetable market as early as 4:30 in the morning, and by 6, he sets up a shop in front of his restaurant, the shutters still down. Behind the shutters, on his restaurant tables are an array of a variety of vegetables.

"My income is not as much as it used to be from the cafe but something is better than nothing," said Gurung. "Of course I will go back to my own restaurant business once the lockdown is over, but what I am doing right now will help tide me over during the crisis."

Gurung is among few who have been locked down in the Valley to have switched their businesses, albeit temporarily.

Amber Mahato, 35, works as a paint-



Dhan Bahadur Gurung operates a vegetable stall outside his restaurant in Kupondole, Lalitpur. POST PHOTO

er and plumber. With the lockdown, there is no work. Mahato's wife, his two sons and two daughters left for their home village in Rautahat just before the prime minister announced suspension of all long-haul transport.

"I was also planning to go. But I got stuck," said Mahato who lives in Bafal. "I thought the lockdown would be lifted soon but it did not. There was no work. I was running out of money."

Mahato pays Rs4,000 for a small room in Bafal. "I was afraid of getting evicted if I failed to pay rent."

Mahato too decided to sell vegetables. "I save up to Rs700 a day by selling vegetables for hours in the morning in the locality," said Mahato.

In Kupondole, customers come to Gurung to buy vegetables while in the Bafal area, Mahato goes door to door.

The government last week extended the lockdown until April 27, calling for a more strict implementation. However, people like Gurung and Mahato take advantage of the morning hours, when people are allowed to buy essentials.

Majority of those who buy vegetables from Gurung are his restaurant customers from the locality.

Rakesh Roy, 43, a creative director at an advertising agency, calls Gurung's switch to selling vegetables a smart move.

"I am a regular at his restaurant. I used to visit for quick drinks and

snacks in the evenings; these days I come here to buy fresh vegetables," Roy told the Post.

Gurung said he buys vegetables worth around Rs10,000 every morning and sells them with a certain profit margin.

Restaurants in Kathmandu were the first casualty of the Covid-19 pandemic, as they stopped seeing customers long before the lockdown.

With tourist arrivals suddenly dropping, eateries in Kathmandu were already without customers. Long before the government announced lockdown, it cancelled all international flights.

Nepal so far has reported 30 Covid-19 cases, but globally infections and death toll are rising.

Though the current lockdown is applicable until April 27, there are chances that it could be extended further. Neighbouring India has extended the lockdown until May 3 and according to officials, Nepal may not lift the lockdown until India lifts it, given the chances of spread of the virus through the open border.

"I have to pay Rs18,000 a month as rent for this room which I have converted into an eatery which has been closed for the last three weeks," said Gurung who has been operating the restaurant for the last nine years. "I don't know when the lockdown is going to be lifted. This vegetable business is not only helping me make some money, it is also keeping me busy."

Anthropologists call people switching to new business models as a rational behaviour.

"I guess this crisis will help people become more self-dependent and self-reliant also," said Dambhar Chemjong, head of the central department of anthropology at Tribhuvan University. "Even if the state does nothing for its citizens, people find a way out. Humans have a tendency to find solutions to their problems by themselves."

## Northern Humla braces for food shortage

Humla saw a prolonged snowfall this winter and the route to Taklakot was closed before the pandemic.

CHHAPAL LAMA  
HUMLA, APRIL 17

With the border points to China closed indefinitely to prevent the spread of Covid-19, Namkha Rural Municipality in northern Humla has been grappling with a food shortage. The rural municipality shares its border with China, from where the local unit would import daily essentials prior to the pandemic.

Nearly a dozen villages in the local unit are facing a food shortage, according to Paljor Lama, a local of Muchu, one of the many villages that depend upon imported goods from China.

Due to unfavourable climate and topography, Humla, especially its northern front, struggles with food shortage every year.

"This year, the crisis is getting worse, with the coronavirus pandemic showing no sign of ending soon," Lama said. "With lockdown in place and shut borders, we can't travel to Taklakot, the nearest town in China, to import food."

Humla saw a prolonged snowfall this winter and the route to Taklakot was closed even before the pandemic, Dorje Lama, a local from Chala, said over the phone.

"Many were of the mind that they would hoard essentials once the snow cleared, but then the pandemic ensued soon afterwards," Lama said, adding that the locally produced food doesn't even last for three months.

In the four villages of Til, Jang, Halji and Chal in the Namkha Rural Municipality, there are 204 households. The villages harvest local produce only once a year.

"The food crisis is perennial, given the difficulty to transport goods to the villages," Lama said. "So most of the

people hoard food that would last them for a year. This year, we couldn't do that."

It takes two days to travel to the district headquarters of Simikot from Chala and four days from Limi, according to Lama.

The crisis is further exacerbated by a sketchy communication network, said Ganesh Rokaya, the in-charge of the Chala Health Post.

"Most of the locals are borrowing and exchanging food with each other," he said.

Local food output barely lasts three months in the mountain region, villagers say.

The nearest local unit from Namkha is Sarkegad, which has a stock of 300 quintals of food, according to Joshi Dhami, deputy chair of the rural municipality.

"The stock will barely be enough for Sarkegad, and some villages have already reported food shortages," Dhami said.

In the Simikot-based depo of the Nepal Food Corporation, there are 5,300 quintals of food stock, according to Ram Bahadur Bista, chief of the depo. The depo has started importing more foodstuff via air, he said.

"We are concerned about the reported shortage of food in Namkha," he said. "If the situation persists, we plan to deliver goods to the local units that report a shortage."

## NATIONAL

# Families of daily wage earners, impoverished Dalits in Province 2 deprived of relief

Most of the local federal units are yet to implement the budget released by the provincial executive for relief distribution even after three weeks of the nationwide lockdown.

PROVINCE 2 BUREAU  
JANAKPUR, APRIL 17

Jagadish Mahato of Gair in Kabilashi Municipality, Sarlahi, is the sole bread earner for his 12-member family—his wife and 10 children. The nationwide lockdown has put him out of work for the past three weeks. His savings, in cash and kind, is already spent.

“I’ve been borrowing food and cash from local shopkeepers, neighbours and relatives,” said Jagadish. “But how long can this go on for?”

Hundreds of families from impoverished communities in several districts of Province 2 are hit hardest by the protracted lockdown enforced to prevent the outbreak of Covid-19. The breadwinners of these families are daily wage workers and they have lost their source of income due to the lockdown, making it difficult for them to make ends meet.

The authorities concerned are yet to reach out to these settlements with reliefs.

To provide relief to the families hit hardest by the lockdown, the provincial government had provided Rs 1 million to Rs 2.5 million to each local unit for the procurement and distribution of relief. However, it has been more than three weeks since the lockdown started and most of the local bodies are yet to implement the budget.

“I am more worried about how to fill out stomachs than contracting the disease right now. I heard the government is providing relief through the local bodies, but nobody has come to our settlement so far,” said Mahato.

Most of the local units in all eight districts of the province have spent the last three weeks assessing data of those in need of government relief. Incidents of irregularities and biases in relief distribution are frequently reported, leaving the destitute people



Hundreds of families from impoverished communities in several districts of Province 2 have been hit hardest by the protracted lockdown.

without any government help.

There are a total of 136 local units, including a metropolis, in the province.

Officials at Kabilashi Municipality in Sarlahi have admitted to the delay in relief distribution.

“We are still assessing data of the needy families to distribute relief. We have been unable to work efficiently due to a lack of employees in the municipality,” said Mayor Kaushal Kishwor Yadav.

Janakpur Sub-metropolitan City, the provincial capital, has also yet to begin relief distribution. According to Gopal Regmi, the chief administrative officer of the sub-metropolis, only 12 wards of a total of 25 have sent their list of beneficiaries so far. He said the sub-metropolis has decided to provide a relief package of 15 kg rice, 1.5 kg pulses, 3 kg potatoes and 1 kg salt to

each affected household in the first phase.

“The packages could not be distributed as the ward chiefs failed to submit the list of the beneficiaries on time,” he said.

In Rautahat, Chandrapur Municipality has decided to provide 20 kg rice along with other essentials to each household of daily wage workers and impoverished Dalits. But the municipality has so far distributed relief at ward No. 3 only.

“The relief distribution got halted because people from well-to-do families also came forward claiming the relief package. We will soon finalise the list of beneficiaries and start distribution again,” said Sanjaya Kafle, chief of ward No. 5 in the municipality. “The local units should work promptly in distributing relief to the needy. But the people’s representatives

have shown poor management and leadership qualities in these difficult times,” said Raj Kumar Raut Kurmi, a civil society leader in Siraha.

In Aahale of Siraha, there are 21 impoverished families of landless Musahars, and none of them has received any relief from the government so far. Sixty-year-old Sudawa Musahar and his wife Devi, daily wage workers, said they haven’t had work since the lockdown started and are running out of food and essentials.

“We are managing food by borrowing from neighbours but if the lockdown continues, we might face starvation,” Sudawa told the Post.

*(Om Prakash Thakur in Sarlahi, Bharat Jarghamagar in Siraha, Shyam Sundar Shashi in Janakpur and Shiva Puri in Rautahat reported the story)*

## Government deal to procure medical equipment via three ...

>> Continued from page 1

“All of these firms are experienced in importing medical goods.”

These three firms will provide personal protective equipment and N95 masks, among other medical equipment, within two weeks, said Shrestha.

The government plans to import medical equipment worth Rs300 million through these three firms from China.

According to officials, the first consignment will arrive in a week’s time, by Wednesday.

The department had issued a short notice earlier this week asking for suppliers to import medical equipment within 15 days. Five firms had applied and three were selected, according to officials.

“We were not sure when we were getting medical equipment under the government-to-government arrangement. But we are fast running out,” said Bhogendra Dotal, director of the Department of Health Services, who signed the agreements with the three firms. “We had no option than to invite the private firms.”

The Nepal Army said it will require at least another week to bring in any medical equipment.

“We will be able to import 120 types of medical equipment from China and India within a week once the money is dispatched to the respective suppliers,” Brigadier-General Bigyan Dev Pandey, the Nepal Army spokesperson, told the Post. “We are expecting the Finance Ministry to release the budget latest by tomorrow [Saturday].”

Pandey said that state-owned Chinese companies will be supplying 67 types of testing reagents and protective gear while India-based manufactures will supply 53 types of medicines.

The Army last week had written to five countries—China, India, Israel, Singapore and South Korea—asking if they could supply the medical equipment. The Chinese and Indian governments had responded that they were ready to supply the required items under a government-to-government deal while the South Korean government said that Nepal could get the required equipment through private companies. Israel and Singapore did not respond.

Since the Army was handed the task of importing medical equipment under a government-to-government deal, Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali has held two rounds of telephonic conversation with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, asking China for the necessary equipment.

At least two government officials who did not wish to be identified said they were not aware of the reasons behind the delay in procuring the equipment under a government-to-government deal, which is expected to be a faster process, compared to competitive bidding.

“We waited two weeks for the supplies to arrive, to no avail,” an official at the Health Ministry told the Post requesting anonymity because he feared retribution.

“We then decided to go for private

firms to address the crisis.”

The decision to bring in the Army ran into controversy the moment it was made, with many asking if the KP Sharma Oli administration was allowing the national defence force to turn into a business firm. There were also questions regarding transparency, given that the previous tender with Omni Business Corporate International was annulled after allegations of corruption.

The decision was made public in such a way that it appeared to have been made after the deal with the Omni was scrapped. But later, it came to light that the Cabinet had decided to get the Army for the job days before the deal with the Omni was scrapped. The Post’s sister paper Kantipur, however, reported on March 29 that the agenda was not discussed at the Cabinet meeting and that even ministers were unaware of the plan, with the decision taken solely at the behest of the prime minister.

## Government plans to import medical equipment worth Rs300 m from China.

Oli, however, in his address to the nation on April 7 tried to make light of the controversy saying that the government had taken right decisions to fight the disease.

Pandey, the Army spokesperson, attributed the delay in procurement to procedural issues.

“It takes time when the due process is followed. The government has approved every decision regarding procurement,” Pandey told the Post. “The Army’s procurement unit, which is led by a major general with the participation of officials from the Health and the Defence ministries, is looking after the procurement process.”

Officials with experience in government-to-government deals say it should not have taken more than a week for the first consignment to arrive, at least from China, as the Chinese market, despite being under pressure, has Nepal’s requirements ready.

According to officials familiar with developments, it took the Army two weeks to prepare the paperwork for the government-to-government deal, hence the delay.

“That’s too late,” said Shanta Raj Subedi, a former finance secretary. “Government-to-government deals are meant to hasten the process.”

According to Subedi, since governments are involved in such deals, there should not be an issue of trust or payment.

“We have our embassy in Beijing so it can follow up on the procurement process. Since this is not a normal time, we should expedite the process,” Subedi told the Post. “Spending two weeks on paperwork means we do not recognise the urgency.”

## Udayapur bans entry to forest areas to keep check on illegal activities

The office took the decision in the wake of increased incidents of bushfire, tree felling, timber smuggling and hunting of wild animals during the lockdown.



Udayapur district has a forest cover of 145,496 hectares.

DILLIRAM KHATIWADA  
UDAYAPUR, APRIL 17

The Division Forest Office in Udayapur has imposed a ban on all locals from entering the forest areas in the district from Friday onwards.

The office took the decision in the wake of increased incidents of bushfires, trees felling, smuggling of woods and hunting of wild animals across the country.

Two weeks ago, a forest patrol team had foiled a suspected poacher from starting a fire in the Belakatar forest area while the Area Police Office in Beltar had arrested two poachers with a musket from Basaha area in Chaudandigadhi Municipality a week ago.

Ambika Prasad Paudel, the division forest officer, said the forest office was compelled to impose the restriction because smugglers and poachers were cutting down trees and hunting animals taking advantage of the lockdown. “We have done this to save our precious medicinal herbs, trees and wild animals,” said Paudel.

Udayapur has 1,45,496 hectares of forest cover. According to the forest office, the ban is applicable to all national, community, leasehold and

## Province 1 to help stranded people reach their homes

MADHAV GHIMIRE  
MORANG, APRIL 17

People from Province 1 who have been stranded in different parts of the country will be quarantined and tested for coronavirus before they are sent home, spokesperson for the provincial government said on Friday.

The stranded will be sheltered at various quarantine centres across the province and they will be sent home in coordination with local governments, said Hikmat Kumar Karki, provincial minister for internal affairs and law.

“The government is working closely with the local units to identify people who stranded people across the country and those who have been travelling

on foot,” Karki said. “Our aim is to ease their travel back home.”

Meanwhile, the provincial government has also made provisions for people from other provinces stuck in Province 1. “Local units and respective provinces will have to bear the cost of their travel, but we will manage transportation facilities to send them home,” said Karki.

The decision comes amid widespread criticism of the federal government for failing to address the problems of people wanting to go home during the lockdown. On Friday, the Supreme Court issued an interim order directing the federal government to rescue people stranded in vulnerable conditions amid the lockdown.

## The lockdown is turning people into couch potatoes

>> Continued from page 1

Physical inactivity has always been regarded as the greatest public health problem, even before the quarantine. The World Health Organisation estimates that globally, 23 percent of adults and 81 percent of adolescents aged 11-17 years were already insufficiently inactive, but new reports have shown that more people are likely to embrace sedentary lifestyles while in quarantine. The Washington Post found that people are often spending as much as eight hours on their mobile phone while in quarantine.

“With nowhere to go and nothing to do, it is easy to get tempted to just curl up on the couch with a mobile device or to just read a book the whole day,” said Vijaya Khanal, an associate professor at the BP Koirala Institute of Health Sciences. “However, these habits can be dangerous.”

Various studies have found a correlation between prolonged sedentary behaviour and health complications. A 2016 research paper found that a sedentary lifestyle was associated with a decline in immune functions in males while a 2015 study found that physical inactivity is one of the leading risk factors for heart disease, diabetes, cancer and death.

According to Jamuna Maharjan, a clinical psychologist at the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization, the psychological impact of self-quarantine can be behind people’s sedentary behaviours.

“As the corona pandemic and quarantine are unusual phenomena, people are dealing with their surroundings according to their mental state,” said Maharjan. “Since people are stressed, they prefer to get peace of mind by doing nothing.”

Like many others, Shakya also said that he is suffering from stress and anxiety.

“When I watch news channels, everything is about Covid-19. I feel

like we are living in a hostile environment and as a result, I don’t feel like doing anything,” he said.

Anxiety and stress have not only made the people inactive but also excessive overeaters.

“Since people are at home, they can easily access the kitchen at all times. Many people are also coping with anxiety, stress and boredom by eating more than they usually do, and as a result, gaining excessive amounts of weight,” said Maharjan.

Sofia Thapa said that since the lockdown, she has put on three kilograms.

“When I went to office, I used to be diet conscious. But at home, my moth-

er brings me food every three hours and I find myself eating everything,” said Thapa, who works in an IT company.

A 2018 research paper shows that sedentary behaviour, low physical activity level and unhealthy dietary patterns are risk factors for obesity.

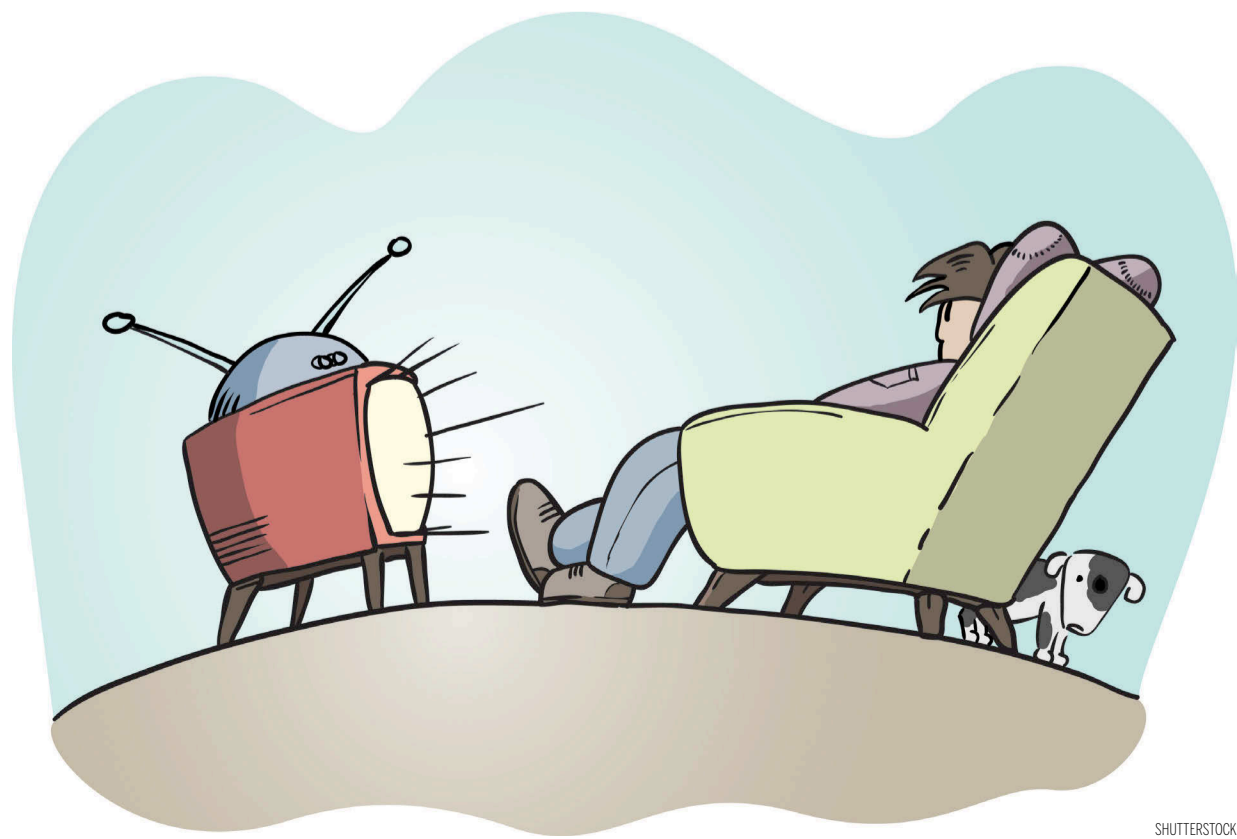
Although the quarantine can cause stress and difficulties in being active, both Khanal and Maharjan said that this should not prevent them from exercising.

Exercise has been shown to have both physical and mental health benefits for individuals. Although there is a restriction on people’s movement,

there are different forms of exercise that can be done at home.

The World Health Organisation has recommended a number of activities that can be done at home and which require no special equipment—dancing, playing with children and performing domestic chores such as cleaning and gardening. Walking in the house, chair squats, sit-ups and push-ups, lifting and carrying groceries can also help ensure physical activity.

Doctors also recommend eating more fruits and vegetables while limiting the intake of salt, sugar and fat in order to maintain healthy lifestyles.



**FOREX**

US Dollar	122.53
Euro	132.89
Pound Sterling	152.86
Japanese Yen	11.37
Chinese Yuan	17.32
Qatari Riyal	33.65
Australian Dollar	77.81
Malaysian Ringgit	28.04
Saudi Arab Riyal	32.61

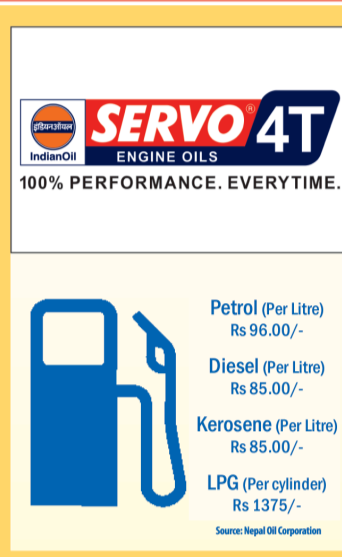
Exchange rates fixed by Nepal Rastra Bank

**BULLION** PRICE PER TOLA

Fine Gold	Rs 77,000
Silver	Rs 720

SOURCE: FENEGOSIDA

**GASOLINE WATCH**



**100% PERFORMANCE. EVERYTIME.**

Petrol (Per Litre)	Rs 96.00/-
Diesel (Per Litre)	Rs 85.00/-
Kerosene (Per Litre)	Rs 85.00/-
LPG (Per cylinder)	Rs 1375/-

Source: Nepal Oil Corporation

# Nepal Airlines pleads for bailout as virus losses eat into cash reserves

The debt-ridden carrier has to fork out around Rs 1.13 billion in interest and instalment payments every quarter.

**POST REPORT**  
KATHMANDU, APRIL 17

Debt-ridden Nepal Airlines is pleading with the Civil Aviation Ministry to help save it from going under amid Covid-19 losses.

The state-owned carrier has formally written to its line ministry asking for a complete waiver of interest on its loans for at least two instalment periods, that is six months.

“The Nepal Airlines board decided to seek a waiver of interest as we are in no position to generate any revenue currently,” said Ganesh Bahadur Chand, acting managing director of the national flag carrier.

Interest and instalment payments amount to around Rs1.13 billion per trimester.

## The airline is seeking a bailout fund of Rs 20 billion from the Finance Ministry.

“Tourism Secretary Kedar Bahadur Adhikari has informed us that the interest waiver proposal has been sent to the finance minister,” Chand told the Post.

Nepal Airlines currently has around Rs300 million in cash reserves which is enough to pay the staff salaries for at least three months, he said. “Revenue has not dried up entirely as we have been operating some charter flights,” he said.

The carrier employs around 1,400 people. “In order to cut expenses, we have given unpaid leave to a number of highly paid pilots, those who earn



Nepal Airlines Airbus A320 prepares to land at Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu.

more than Rs1 million monthly,” said Chand.

Since the beginning of the autumn travel rush in October, full-fare passengers had been filling its flights which pulled the company back from the brink of bankruptcy. The autumn earnings allowed the teetering national flag carrier to repay creditors breathing down its neck.

It paid Rs572 million to the Citizens Investment Trust and Rs440 million to the Employees Provident Fund in January, after having missed three quarterly instalments.

In November 2018, Nepal Airlines had announced that it was running out of cash and close to bankruptcy, less than four months after making the largest jet purchase in the history of Nepali aviation in a bid to reclaim its long-lost glory with a determined fleet expansion plan.

During that time, its two A330 jets were in the air for less than seven hours daily, less than half the required flight time needed to generate a decent profit.

Subsequently, the cash-strapped corporation started defaulting on loans. It was the first time the airline had defaulted on a debt payment even though it has a long history of poor financial performance in the past several years.

The airline has been seeking a bailout fund of Rs20 billion from the Finance Ministry. Currently, the corporation's loans from various institutions stand at Rs37 billion, and this translates into Rs3.66 billion in interest payments annually.

Aviation is one of the worst hit sectors.

According to an estimate by the International Air Transport

Association, around Rs50 billion in revenue will be wiped out and 175,000 people rendered jobless in Nepal's aviation industry due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

The estimate is based on a scenario where severe restrictions on travel are lifted after three months.

Nepal is expected to see passenger demand fall by 39 percent year-on-year, translating into losses of 2.6 million passengers in both domestic and international sectors this year alone.

Last year, Nepal's international and domestic air passenger traffic crossed 7.32 million, with more than 20,000 travellers taking to the skies daily.

The International Air Transport Association is urging countries in Asia and the Pacific to take urgent action to provide financial support to their airline industry.

# Oil rises as Trump plans to ease lockdown

**REUTERS**  
LONDON, APRIL 17

Oil prices rose on Friday as President Donald Trump laid out plans to ease the US coronavirus lockdown and on reports, later played down, that a drug may potentially help treat COVID-19.

Brent rose by 54 cents, or 1.9 percent, to \$28.36 a barrel by 1133 GMT and US crude CLC2 for June was up 4 cents, or 0.2 percent, at \$25.57.

The less active US crude contract CLC1 for May tumbled by \$1.59, or 8 percent, to \$18.28, attributable to the imminent expiry of the contract, on April 21, and fast-filling crude storage.

“As the oversupply is more a topic for right now, the May contract trades at a deep discount to June,” UBS analyst Giovanni Staunovo said.

Investors pinned their hopes on plans to ease lockdown measures after Trump laid out new guidelines for US states to emerge from a coronavirus shutdown in a staggered, three-stage approach.

“If more of the global economy enacts plans to reopen and restores some sense of normality, that could help oil prices find a firmer floor in May, aided by the OPEC+ supply cuts kicking in,” said Han Tan, market analyst at FXTM.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and producers including Russia, a grouping known as OPEC+, agreed on production cuts of nearly 10 million bpd last weekend after an earlier oil supply pact collapsed.

Oil prices were also boosted by a report of encouraging partial data from trials of US company Gilead Sciences' experimental drug remdesivir in severe COVID-19 patients, although the company cautioned that full data would need to be analysed to draw any conclusion. Both oil benchmarks are still heading for a second consecutive week of losses, with US oil prices at 18-year lows.

# Boeing restarting commercial airplane production next week

**REUTERS**  
WASHINGTON, APRIL 17

Boeing Co said it will resume commercial airplane production next week in Washington state after suspending operations last month in response to the coronavirus pandemic, and the company's chief executive told employees the aerospace industry will need financial help from the government.

“Our industry will need the government's support, which will be critical to ensuring access to credit markets and likely take the form of loans versus outright grants,” Boeing Chief Executive Dave Calhoun told employees in a letter seen by Reuters. “Our team continues to focus on the best ways to keep liquidity flowing through our business and to our supply chain until our customers are buying airplanes again,” it said.

About 27,000 Boeing workers in the Puget Sound area will return to production of the 747, 767, 777 and 787 jet programmes.



A worker leaves the Boeing Everett Factory, amid the coronavirus disease outbreak, in Everett, Washington, US.

Employees in the Puget Sound for the 747, 767 and 777 will return starting April 20, while employees on the 787 programme will return April 23 or April 24.

In January, Boeing halted production of the 737 MAX after two fatal crashes in five months. Employees on the 737 programme in Puget Sound are returning to work starting April 20 as they resume working toward restarting MAX production, the company said.

Boeing, which said around 200 employees globally have tested positive for the coronavirus, is instituting a series of safeguards including staggering shift start times, adding floor markings and signage to create physical distance and requiring face coverings for employees at company sites in Washington.

Boeing is asking employees to perform self-health checks before coming to work and to stay home if ill. It will conduct employee wellness checks before every shift and voluntary temperature screening at many manufacturing locations.

A Boeing spokesman declined to say whether the company would seek government assistance.

Boeing said last month it wanted the government to “ensure a minimum of \$60 billion in access to public and private liquidity, including loan guarantees, for the aerospace manufacturing industry.”



Empty boats are seen in the Lakeside area of tourist hotspot Pokhara. Due to the extended lockdown, all tourism hubs have become deserted. The government has also cancelled its ambitious Visit Nepal 2020 campaign, which was launched in January with the goal of attracting 2 million foreign tourists.

# Europe car sales tank 55 percent in March

**ASSOCIATED PRESS**  
MILAN, APRIL 17

European car sales tanked last month amid strict lockdown measures to contain the coronavirus that shut down dealerships for at least half of March and dried up consumer spending.

The European carmaker's association, ACEA, said Friday that new car registrations “recorded a dramatic drop” of 55 percent to 567,308 units.

The drop is worse even than during the 2008-9 global financial crisis, which triggered a six-year slump in car purchases. The steepest losses during that financial crisis occurred in January 2009, when sales fell 27 percent.

During the coronavirus emergency,

European consumers are facing economic uncertainty due to the public health crisis that has triggered a dramatic decrease in national wealth, industrial production and commerce deemed non-essential. All that is having a knock-on effect on employment and salaries, even with short-term unemployment schemes being activated in most countries.

Auto industry production shutdowns have affected 1.1 million jobs and reduced production by at least 1.2 million vehicles through the end of last month, according to ACEA statistics. Auto industry revenues account for 7 percent of EU GDP.

Italy, the first country to be hit by the virus in Europe, suffered the worst drop at 85 percent, with just 28,326 new cars registered in March.

# China suffers historic contraction as virus paralyzes economy

**AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE**  
BEIJING, APRIL 17

China's economy shrank for the first time in decades last quarter as the coronavirus paralysed the country, in a historic blow to the Communist Party's pledge of continued prosperity in return for unquestioned political power.

Gross domestic product in the world's second-largest economy fell 6.8 percent in January-March from a year earlier, according to government figures—a stunning turnabout for a generation of Chinese consumers raised on super-charged growth rates.

The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) data marked the first contraction since the government began logging quarterly performance in the early 1990s, and a sharp reversal from the six-percent expansion during the fourth quarter of 2019.

The figure beat an 8.2 percent decline forecast by an AFP poll of analysts before the news was released.

But economists have long harboured suspicions that official Chinese economic data is massaged for political reasons.

“The actual contraction in the first quarter, especially in March, could be worse than headline numbers suggest,” Nomura analysts said Friday.

Experts warn that growth is unlikely to rebound soon, with depressed demand for Chinese goods in overseas markets that are also grappling with the pandemic.

Fears of a second outbreak are also dragging on efforts to fully fire up China's economy, a major engine of global growth.

“We are now facing rising pressure in the prevention of imported epidemic infections, as well as new difficulties and challenges for resumption

work and production,” NBS spokesman Mao Shengyong told a press conference.

Full-year GDP growth expectations have fallen to 1.7 percent, according to AFP's poll, in what would be the worst annual performance since 1976.

But the International Monetary Fund, which has pegged China's 2020 full-year expansion even lower at 1.2 percent, is predicting a strong rebound to 9.2 percent growth in 2021.

Mao said only that if the pandemic can be brought under control, “the second half of the year should be better than the first”.

## Fears of a second outbreak are also dragging on efforts to fully fire up China's economy.

The economic figures are deeply significant in China due to the tacit political compact between the Communist Party and the country's 1.4 billion people.

More than four decades since Beijing abandoned radical Maoism in favour of authoritarian capitalism—achieving spectacular growth—Chinese citizens have largely acquiesced to the party's monopoly on power, in exchange for continued prosperity.

China analyst Jean-Pierre Cabestan of Hong Kong Baptist University said the current situation puts a nail in the coffin of the party's stated goal of doubling GDP from 2010-2020.

But he saw no immediate peril for the all-powerful regime, especially if

it can maintain stability and steer the country through the health crisis while other countries struggle.

“I think that's a very important set of achievements which the party is going to promote in order to remain legitimate,” Cabestan said.

Despite travel restrictions being eased and businesses stirring again, Friday's data showed a 1.1 decline in Chinese industrial output for March as factory shutdowns lingered, and retail sales also plummeted 15.8 percent as consumers played it safe at home.

More pain is expected, according to Capital Economics chief Asia economist Mark Williams.

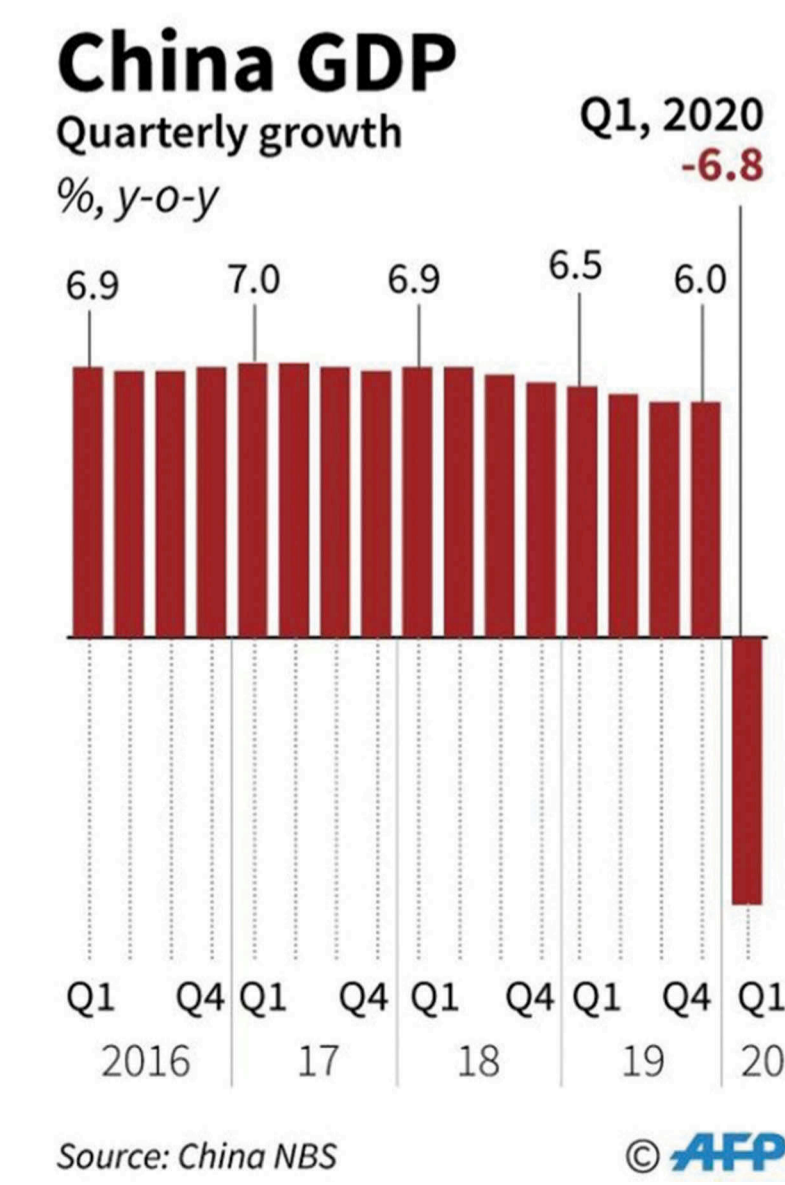
“Public records suggest that at least half a million firms were dissolved in the first quarter and more are likely to close shop,” he wrote in a report this week.

Williams added that surveys pointed to more layoffs in March, unemployment will likely remain higher in coming months, and depressed overseas demand could reduce Chinese exports—which account for 15 percent of national GDP—by as much as half.

Shrinking export demand may have shaved 1.8 percentage points off real GDP growth in the first quarter, Nomura's chief China economist Lu Ting had said earlier.

Nomura expects a “large stimulus package” consisting of financial relief targeted at businesses, banks and households. Beijing already has ramped up stimulus for smaller enterprises and low-income individuals.

Wuhan, the central Chinese city where the coronavirus outbreak was first detected, announced Friday it would begin handing out vouchers worth 500 million yuan (\$70 million) to boost consumption in the city of 11 million people, state media reported.



WORLD

BRIEFING

**Africa could see 300,000 deaths this year**

**JOHANNESBURG:** Africa could see 300,000 deaths from the coronavirus even under the best-case scenario, according to a new report that cites modelling by the Imperial College London. Under the worst-case scenario with no interventions against the virus, Africa could see 3.3 million deaths and 1.2 billion infections, the report by the UN Economic Commission for Africa says. Even with "intense social distancing" under the best-case scenario the continent could see more than 122 million infections, the report says.

**Iran parades medical gear for Army Day**

**DUBAI:** Iran on Friday paraded disinfection vehicles, mobile hospitals and other medical equipment as it marked its national Army Day, to underscore the military's role in battling the coronavirus pandemic which has hit the country hard. The small "Defenders of the Homeland, Helpers of Health" parade, held at a training centre before a group of commanders in face masks, was a far cry from the typical Army Day parades, which normally feature marching infantry, missiles, submarines and armoured vehicles, with warplanes flying overhead.

**Bolsonaro fires health minister**

**BRASILIA:** Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro fired his health minister on Thursday after clashing with him over how to fight the new coronavirus, and again called for states to end stay-at-home orders that he said were hurting the economy. Few global leaders have done more than Bolsonaro to play down the pandemic, which has killed nearly 2,000 Brazilians. He has called the virus "a little flu" and criticized state governors for imposing restrictions supported by health experts and the popular outgoing minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta. Brazil's Bolsonaro accuses house speaker of trying to remove him from office in televised remarks met with pot-banging protests in several major cities. Bolsonaro said Mandetta did not fully appreciate the need to protect jobs and he called again for a resumption of business in Brazil, Latin America's largest economy. (AGENCIES)

**Chinese epicentre Wuhan raises number of virus dead by 1,290**

**ASSOCIATED PRESS**  
BEIJING, APRIL 17

At least 50 percent more people died in China's virus epicentre of Wuhan than previously counted, with state media on Friday attributing the initial undercount to how overwhelmed the health system was coping with thousands of sick patients.

The addition of 1,290 victims raised Wuhan's death toll to 3,869, the most in China, and may confirm suspicions that far more people died in the city where the illness began than has been previously announced.

The total confirmed cases in the city of 11 million people also increased by 325 to 50,333, accounting for about two-thirds of China's total 82,367 announced cases.

The revised Wuhan figures raised China's death toll to 4,632, up from 3,342 announced by the National Health Commission on Friday morning.

The official Xinhua News Agency quoted an unidentified official with Wuhan's epidemic and prevention and control headquarters as saying that during the early stages of the outbreak, "due to the insufficiency in admission and treatment capability, a few medical institutions failed to connect with the disease prevention and control system in time, while hospitals were overloaded and medics were overwhelmed with patients."

"As a result, belated, missed and mistaken reporting occurred," the official was quoted as saying.

The new figures were compiled by comparing data from Wuhan's epidemic prevention and control system, the city funeral service, the municipal hospital authority, and nucleic acid testing to "remove double-counted cases and fill in missed cases," the official was quoted as saying.

Deaths occurring outside hospitals had not been registered previously and some medical institutions had confirmed cases but reported them late or not at all, the official said.

Questions have long swirled around the accuracy of China's case reporting, with Wuhan in particular going several days in January without reporting new cases or deaths. That has led to accusations that Chinese officials were seeking to minimize the impact of the outbreak and wasting opportunities to bring it under control in a shorter time.



Magician Rajkumar performs for people at a sports complex turned into a shelter after India extended a nationwide lockdown to slow down the spreading of coronavirus, in New Delhi, India, on Friday. (REUTERS)

**Trump gives governors options on how to reopen the economy**

In phase one, for instance, the plan recommends strict social distancing for all people in public.

**ASSOCIATED PRESS**  
WASHINGTON, APRIL 17

President Donald Trump has given governors a road map for recovering from the economic pain of the coronavirus pandemic, laying out "a phased and deliberate approach" to restoring normal activity in places that have strong testing and are seeing a decrease in Covid-19 cases.

"We're starting our life again," Trump said during his daily press briefing. "We're starting rejuvenation of our economy again."

He added, "This is a gradual process."

The new guidelines are aimed at easing restrictions in areas with low transmission of the coronavirus, while holding the line in harder-hit locations. They make clear that the return to normalcy will be a far longer process than Trump initially envisioned, with federal officials warning that some social distancing measures may need to remain in place through the end of the year to prevent a new outbreak. And they largely reinforce plans already in the works by governors, who have primary responsibility for public health in their states.

"You're going to call your own shots," Trump told the governors on Thursday afternoon in a conference call, according to an audio recording obtained by The Associated Press. "We're going to be standing alongside of you."

Places with declining infections and strong testing would begin a three-phase gradual reopening of business-



A nurse wipes away tears as she stands outside NYU Langone Medical Center on 1st Avenue in Manhattan as New York Police Department Mounted Police and other units came to cheer and thank healthcare workers at 7pm during the outbreak of the coronavirus disease in New York. (REUTERS)

es and schools. In phase one, for instance, the plan recommends strict social distancing for all people in public. Gatherings larger than 10 people are to be avoided, and nonessential travel is discouraged.

In phase two, people are encouraged to maximize social distancing and limit gatherings to no more than 50 people unless precautionary measures are taken. Travel could resume.

Phase three envisions a return to

normalcy for most Americans, with a focus on identification and isolation of any new infections.

Trump said recent trends in some states were so positive that they could almost immediately begin taking the steps laid out in phase one.

At the earliest, the guidelines suggest, some parts of the country could see a resumption in normal commerce and social gatherings after a month of evaluating whether easing up on

restrictions has led to a resurgence in virus cases. In other parts of the country, or if virus cases pick up, it could be substantially longer.

The guidelines also include general recommendations to businesses as they plan for potential reopenings, suggesting temperature-taking, rapid Covid-19 testing and widespread disinfection efforts in workplaces.

Those most susceptible to the respiratory disease are advised to remain sheltered in place until their area enters the final phase—and even then are encouraged to take precautions to avoid close contact with other people.

Governors, for their part, have been moving ahead with their own plans for how to safely revive normal activity. Seven Midwestern governors announced Thursday they will coordinate on reopening their economies. Similar pacts were announced earlier in the week in the West and Northeast.

Two in three Americans expressed concerns that restrictions meant to slow the spread of the virus would be eased too quickly, according to a Pew Research Center survey released Thursday. More than 30,000 people in the United States have died from the virus.

Former Vice President Joe Biden, Trump's likely opponent in November's presidential election, said on Thursday evening that Trump "kind of punted."

"We're not going to be able to really make significant changes in the three phases the president's talking about until we're able to test much more broadly," Biden said on CNN.

**Facebook to warn users who 'liked' coronavirus hoaxes**

**ASSOCIATED PRESS**  
WASHINGTON, APRIL 17

Facebook will soon let you know if you shared or interacted with dangerous coronavirus misinformation on the site, the latest in a string of aggressive efforts the social media giant is taking to contain an outbreak of viral falsehoods.

The new notice will be sent to users who have clicked on, reacted to, or commented on posts featuring harmful or false claims about Covid-19 after they have been removed by moderators. The alert, which will start appearing on Facebook in the coming weeks, will direct users to a site where the World Health Organization lists and debunks virus myths and rumours.

Facebook, Google and Twitter are introducing stricter rules, altered algorithms and thousands of fact checks to stop the spread of bad misinformation online about the virus.

Challenges remain. Tech platforms have sent home human moderators who police the platforms, forcing them to rely on automated systems to take down harmful content. They are also up against people's mistrust of authoritative sources for information, such as the WHO.

**Facebook, Google and Twitter are introducing stricter rules and thousands of fact checks.**

"Through this crisis, one of my top priorities is making sure that you see accurate and authoritative information across all of our apps," Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg wrote on his Facebook page Thursday.

The company disclosed on Thursday that it put more than 40 million warning labels in March over videos, posts or articles about the coronavirus that fact-checking organizations have determined are false or misleading. The number includes duplicate claims—the labels were based on 4,000 fact checks.

Facebook says those warning labels have stopped 95 percent of users from clicking on the false information.

"It's a big indicator that people are trusting the fact checkers," said Baybars Orsek, the director of the International Fact-Checking Network. "The label has an impact on people's information consumption."

But Orsek cautioned that the data Facebook provided should be reviewed by outside editors or experts, and called on the historically secretive company to release regular updates about the impact of its fact-checking initiative.

Orsek's organisation is a nonprofit that certifies news organisations as fact checkers, a requirement to produce fact-checking articles for Facebook. Facebook has recruited dozens of news organizations around the globe to fact check bad information on its site. The Associated Press is part of that program.

Facebook will also begin promoting the articles that debunk Covid-19 misinformation, of which there are thousands, on a new information center called "Get The Facts." Putting trustworthy information in front of people can be just as useful, if not more, than simply debunking falsehoods.

Still, conspiracy theories, claims about unverified treatments, and misinformation about coronavirus vaccines continue to pop up on the site daily—sometimes circumventing the safeguards Facebook has implemented.

**Unsafe abortions could skyrocket as coronavirus closes clinics worldwide**

**THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION**  
WASHINGTON, APRIL 17

Clinic closures due to coronavirus in developing countries could lead to millions of unsafe abortions and thousands of maternal deaths if nothing is done, researchers said on Thursday.

The pandemic is decreasing women's access to sexual and reproductive health care worldwide as supply chains are disrupted, transport is restricted and services deemed "non-essential" are shut down, said the Guttmacher Institute, a reproductive health think tank, in a report.

Just a 10 percent decline in access to care in low- and middle-income countries would result in an additional 15 million unintended pregnancies, 28,000 maternal deaths and 3 million unsafe abortions, the study showed.

That is a conservative estimate for what might happen in reality, with some experts predicting a decline of up to 80 percent, said Elizabeth Sully, senior research scientist at Guttmacher. "There's a lot to suggest that we could see this and we could see something worse," Sully told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"We need to take action now in a preventative way before we start to see

these types of impacts." Countries should make sure sexual and reproductive health services are essential and staffed, make contraceptives available without a prescription and explore innovative models of care such as telemedicine, the report recommended.

The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) reported last week that more than 5,600 of its clinics and care providers—representing 14 percent of the total—had closed because of the outbreak across 64 countries.

Countries particularly affected by closures included Pakistan, El Salvador, Zambia, Sudan, Colombia, Malaysia, Uganda, Ghana, Germany, Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka, said IPPF.

Charity Marie Stopes International (MSI), which provides contraception and abortion services in 37 countries, has estimated 9.5 million women and girls would lose access to its services in 2020 due to the pandemic.

In Nepal, where it performs more than 75 percent of all safe abortions, MSI was forced to shut down services due to the lockdown on March 24, it said. It has since been able to reopen 12 of its 36 clinics at limited capacity but said it is far from meeting need.



A health worker (left) speaks to patients during a visit by Netherlands Minister for Trade and Development Cooperation Lilianne Ploumen at a Family Health Options clinic in the Kibera slums in Nairobi, Kenya. (REUTERS)

## BRIEFING

## UEFA executive committee to meet as uncertainty continues

**BERN:** UEFA will hold a meeting of its decision-making executive committee on April 23 with discussions likely to centre on how, when and if the European football season will be able to resume amid the coronavirus outbreak. The sport has been brought to a standstill by the outbreak with the Euro 2020 competition postponed until next year and both national leagues and continental club competitions on hold. Football associations, leagues, clubs and players around Europe are debating how to complete their seasons. UEFA, European football's governing body, has made it clear that it wants its member associations to complete their domestic seasons rather than abandon them.

## Turkmenistan league set to resume despite virus threat

**ASHGABAT:** Turkmenistan in Central Asia is set to resume its football season with spectators at the weekend, making it only the second country in the world to let fans attend matches as the new coronavirus shuts down almost all of world football. Belarus is the only other country letting fans attend matches at the moment. The Turkmenistan Football Federation suspended its eight-team domestic league on March 24 but gave no official reason for its decision. Its football championship will restart after a three-week hiatus on Sunday when Ashgabat-based Altyn Asyr face local rivals Kopetdag.

## Australian board furloughs majority of staff

**MELBOURNE:** Cricket Australia (CA) said on Thursday it has decided to furlough the majority of its staff on reduced pay until the end of the financial year to cope with the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The global health crisis has halted professional cricket around the world, leaving most boards bracing for significant revenue reductions. "We have made the decision during this period of isolation, where activity has naturally been reduced, to stand down our people on reduced pay (with the exception of a skeleton staff) effective 27 April..." CA said in a statement. "We will continue to seek advice from medical experts and relevant government agencies.... and to return to business as soon as possible." (AGENCIES)

## Setien not convinced by plans to restart La Liga



A file photo shows Barcelona's Lionel Messi celebrating after scoring a goal against Real Sociedad during their La Liga match at Nou Camp in Barcelona.

**REUTERS**  
BARCELONA, APRIL 17

Barcelona coach Quique Setien is pessimistic that the Spanish top flight season will be able to be completed and has called La Liga's conditions for the campaign recommencing "a non-starter" due to the continued threat of the novel coronavirus.

La Liga has been on hold since March 10 due to the pandemic although president Javier Tebas has said matches could start up again on either May 29, June 7 or June 28, most likely without spectators. Tebas has estimated Spanish clubs would lose around one billion euros (\$1.09 billion) if the season is not completed.

A draft of the league's protocol, seen by Reuters, for returning to train-

ing and matches once given the green light by health authorities recommends that clubs hold training camps at their training grounds or hotels for a two-week period before matches can start again.

Only first team players, coaching staff and a small number of other staff would be allowed to access the facility, with everyone at the training camp being subjected to two Covid-19 tests before accessing the site. Testing would continue to take place during the camps, added the protocol.

But Setien, whose Barca side held a two-point lead over Real Madrid at the top of the standings when the campaign was indefinitely postponed, does not think it is so simple. "Everyone wants to be ready for when the season starts again but that cannot

happen until the health authorities can guarantee that there will be no problems," Setien told Catalan radio station RAC1 on Thursday. "I have read the protocol and the reality is I don't know if it can be carried out as it is written, I think it's unworkable, I think it's very difficult logistically."

Barca midfielder Sergio Busquets also expressed doubts about the feasibility of clubs holding training camps. "We can start training again little by little but it will be difficult once everyone comes together and the competition starts again and teams start travelling," he told Spanish radio stations Onda Cero and Cadena Cope. "I have heard that La Liga wants teams to concentrate for a few months, I think that's too much and it cannot

be done. There will be too many problems."

La Liga declined to comment on Setien and Busquets' comments although a source close to the matter said stakeholders were continuing to discuss a plan to return to matches along with the association of European leagues. "The objective of La Liga is to create a protocol of the highest possible standard that can allow return to training and get us in a good, healthy, way to the light at the end of this dark tunnel," added the source.

More than 19,000 people have died from the coronavirus in Spain although this week the government loosened the terms of a strict lockdown to allow some businesses back to work.

## Top four will earn European berths even if season is abandoned

**REUTERS**  
LONDON, APRIL 17

If the La Liga season is cut short or abandoned due to the coronavirus pandemic, the four teams on top of the most recent completed round of standings will qualify for next season's Champions League, the Spanish Football Association (RFEF) said.

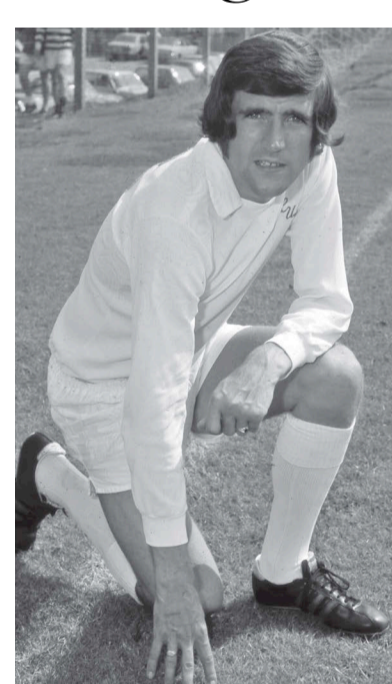
With all teams having played 27 matches before the RFEF suspended play on March 12 due to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, Barcelona, Real Madrid, Sevilla and Real Sociedad are the four teams that will go through to Europe's premier club competition if no more action is possible this season.

"The RFEF wants to have done its homework in case, in the event of a suspension of competitions, it receives the request from UEFA regarding the Spanish clubs that would have access to European competitions next season," RFEF general secretary Andreu Camps said in a statement on Thursday. "Thus... it has been agreed in the RFEF Delegate Commission to make a plan in order to give certainty in an extreme scenario, such as not being able to finish the competitions, so that all the clubs know the new scenario they are facing."

After the last round of games were completed on March 10, Barcelona topped La Liga with 58 points, two ahead of Real Madrid. Sevilla are third on 47, with Real Sociedad a point further back in fourth. The teams in fifth and sixth place - which are currently Getafe and Atletico Madrid - will also qualify for the Europa League.

The result of the Copa Del Rey final, if that is contested, could impact which team grabs the final Europa League spot. With Copa Del Rey finalists Real Sociedad already in the top four, their opponents Athletic Bilbao (10th in the league) are in pole position for the third Europa League spot unless they have climbed into the top six by the time the final league standings are decided. Should that occur, the final Europa League spot will go to the seventh-placed team in La Liga.

## Leeds great Hunter dies of coronavirus



Norman Hunter

**REUTERS**  
LONDON, APRIL 17

Former Leeds United and England defender Norman 'Bites Yer Legs' Hunter has died at 76 after contracting the new coronavirus, the Championship (second-tier) club said on Friday.

"Norman was taken to hospital last week after being diagnosed with Covid-19 and despite continuing to battle and the best efforts of NHS staff, he sadly lost his fight earlier this morning," Leeds said on their website. Hunter made 726 appearances for Leeds in 15 years at the Yorkshire club and earned his fearsome nickname for his tough tackling.

He won two top-flight league titles, an FA Cup and a League Cup with Leeds and played in their 1975 European Cup final defeat by German side Bayern Munich. He was also part of England's 1966 World Cup-winning squad, without playing, and came on as a substitute in the 3-2 defeat by West Germany in the 1970 World Cup quarter-final. Hunter, who won 28 caps for England, was also the first winner of

the PFA Players' Player of the Year award in 1974.

"He leaves a huge hole in the Leeds United family; his legacy will never be forgotten and our thoughts are with Norman's family and friends at this very difficult time," Leeds said.

The Professional Footballers Association (PFA) said the game had lost a legend. Former England team mate Alan Mullery remembered a man who never lost his competitive spirit, even when on holiday. "We used to go on cruises together," he told Sky Sports television.

"I remember we were on a trip once and we were playing the crew and I was the referee and he was playing. And he's hit this fellow in a 50-50 tackle and this fellow did three somersaults and landed on his backside. I said to him 'Norman, these passengers have paid a lot of money to come on it.' And he said 'We've still got to win, Alan. We can't let them win. To talk about him as a footballer, he was probably one of the hardest footballers you would ever come up against. And off the field he was absolutely gentle.'"

## Graeme Smith made permanent director of Cricket South Africa

**REUTERS**  
CAPE TOWN, APRIL 17

Cricket South Africa (CSA) confirmed on Friday they had made former Test skipper Graeme Smith's tenure as director of cricket permanent, keeping him in the role until March 2022.

Smith, the most successful Test captain in history, has been in the role in an acting capacity since December. CSA acting chief executive Jacques Faul told a media conference that Smith had impressed since in the position.

"Graeme has made a huge impact with his energy, expertise, hard work ethic and characteristic determination and passion he has brought to the position," said Faul. "Although there is certainly a great deal of work to be done, as reflected by the performances of our various national teams, he has certainly put our cricket on an upward trajectory that provides light at the end of the tunnel."

Faul added they were pleased to tie Smith down ahead of what is likely to



Graeme Smith

be a turbulent time for the game due to the Covid-19 pandemic. "We wanted to appoint him permanently from the word go, but there was a lot of uncertainty at the time," Faul said. "Graeme

also wanted to have the opportunity to see if the partnership can work. I'm not sure if anybody's career can start with so many challenges and what will be a new way of looking at cricket."

Smith appointed former team mate Mark Boucher as head coach of the national team and started with a 3-1 home Test series loss to England, but ended the 2019/20 season with a 3-0 One-Day International whitewash of a strong Australia side.

"There is a lot of work that still needs to be done, not just at international level but throughout our pipeline development pathways as well but I am determined to get South African cricket back to where it belongs as one of the world leaders at international level," Smith, 39, said.

The former opening batsman played 117 Tests, leading South Africa in 108 of those and winning 53. South Africa are due to tour Sri Lanka for a limited overs series in June but that looks increasingly unlikely due to the global health crisis.

## Sri Lanka offers to host suspended cash-rich IPL

**REUTERS**  
NEW DELHI, APRIL 17

This year's Indian Premier League (IPL) was officially postponed until further notice because of the Covid-19 pandemic on Thursday but the Indian cricket board believes it can find a "safe" window later for the lucrative Twenty20 tournament.

The eight-team league, originally scheduled from March 29, was initially suspended until Wednesday even as India entered a three-week lockdown last month. With the lockdown being extended until May 3 and travel and other restrictions in place, a second postponement was inevitable.

With health concerns and lockdown measures in mind, the IPL Governing Council decided to suspend the 2020 season until further notice, Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) secretary Jay Shah said in a statement. "The health and safety of the nation and everyone involved in our great sport remains our top priority..." Shah said. "...the BCCI along with the franchise owners, broadcaster, sponsors and all the stakeholders acknowledge that the IPL 2020 season will only commence when it is safe and appropriate to do so."

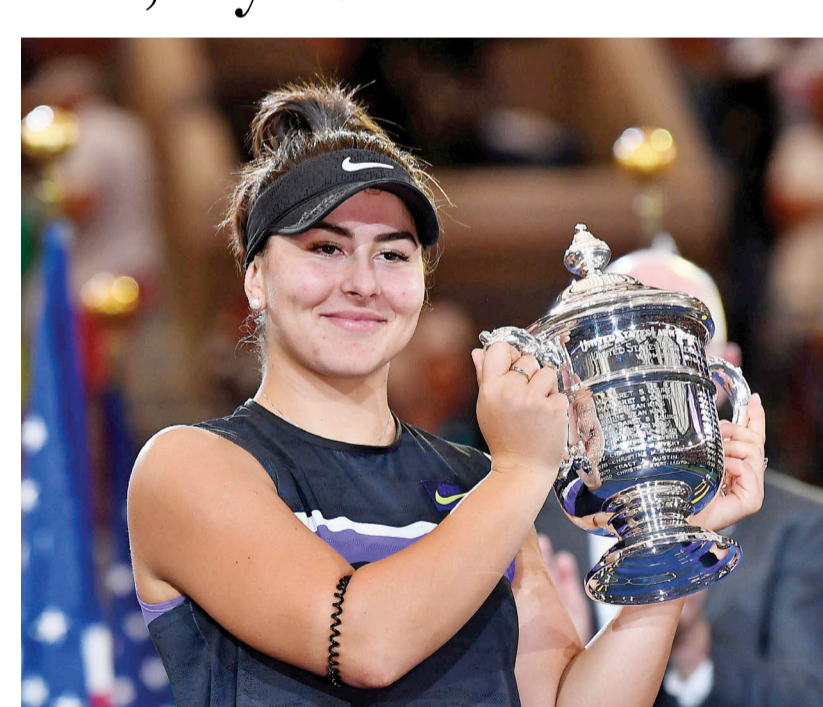
The confirmation came a day after key franchise officials told Reuters that the eight-team league had been indefinitely postponed. "BCCI will continue to monitor and review the situation regarding a potential start date in close partnership with all of its stakeholders..." Shah added.

The number of confirmed coronavirus infections in India has jumped to 12,380, including 414 deaths, as of Thursday.

Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) has offered to host the tournament. "It looks like Sri Lanka will be clear of the coronavirus before India," SLC president Shammi Silva told Reuters in Colombo. "If so, we can host the tournament here. We will be writing to the Indian cricket board soon," he added.

Indian media speculated on a possible window for the IPL in September-October, before this year's Twenty20 World Cup in Australia. The uncertainty is a big setback, particularly for the 62 cricketers bought for a collective \$18.34 million at the players' auction in December. Australian Pat Cummins became the IPL's most expensive overseas buy ever when the Kolkata Knight Riders paid a staggering \$2.18 million for the fast bowler in the auction in Kolkata.

## US Open unlikely without fans, says USTA head



A file photo shows Bianca Andreescu of Canada with the US Open championship trophy after beating Serena Williams of the USA in the 2019 women's singles final.

**REUTERS**  
LONDON, APRIL 17

The organisers of the US Open said on Thursday a decision on whether to hold the Grand Slam this year amid the coronavirus outbreak will be made in June, and playing it without fans is on the table but highly unlikely.

The US Open, which is scheduled to run from August 31 to September 13, is both the largest and loudest of the four Grand Slam events on the tennis calendar and United States Tennis Association (USTA) chief executive Mike Dowse does not anticipate that changing.

"Playing without spectators, we're not taking anything off the table right now, but to be honest and open, I think that's highly unlikely," Dowse said on a conference call. "That's not really in the spirit of the celebration of tennis. It also goes back to the health and well-being of not just the spectators but of our players and support staff that help run the tournament."

The US Open is held annually in New York City, which is the hardest hit US city in the coronavirus pandemic and this week revised its official Covid-19 death toll sharply higher to more than 10,000. The USTA Billie

Jean King National Tennis Center, which is the home of the US Open, has even been turned into temporary hospital to help in the battle against the coronavirus.

Last year's US Open drew an all-time attendance record of nearly 740,000 fans and the event is the engine that drives the USTA, which is governing body for the sport in the country. The French Open, the first Grand Slam to be hit by the spread of the coronavirus, moved the claycourt event to September 20 to October 4 from its traditional May start while the Wimbledon championships, set to begin in late June, were cancelled.

"Time is on our side at this point," said Dowse. "Obviously our ambition is to run the tournament." Dowse said the USTA will make a decision on whether it is safe to stage the US Open after consulting doctors. "Things are fluid. If the medical experts come back and say here is a foolproof way of running a very safe tournament, unfortunately it is to be without fans, we may reconsider and look at it at this point," said Dowse. "Today it's just too early to kind of speculate on what the exact specifics will be at that time."

# The Tinkerbell problem

Three days into isolation, I had realised I wasn't who I thought I was. This was a crisis.



SHUTTERSTOCK

SHEFALI UPRETI

**A** day before the lockdown, I began to cough. A foreboding little tickle settled in my throat that evening and by morning the cough was dry and constant. It alarmed everyone. I was immediately sealed inside my bedroom, sitting alone on my bed and coughing to myself in my own quarantined air.

The cough didn't alarm me: I hadn't touched anyone or been near enough anyone; and for two weeks I had washed my hands with Dettol until they had become marbled with flaking red skin. The isolation didn't alarm me either: I was thrilled about being by myself in the quiet. My mother slipped me meals and slipped away before she could no longer hold her breath; my father stepped in once he got home from work, wearing his white gloves and the scent of hospital rubbing alcohol, to listen to my lungs with his ice-circle stethoscope. As long as I coughed, I would be excluded from all family drama. When I heard shouting, I had permission to plug in my headphones and daydream. I had thought this would be, spoiled and obnoxious as it is, a recluse's heaven: left alone, not having to perform orderliness or feign interest for anybody. It turns out I, spoiled and obnoxious as I am, was not a touch equipped for isolation.

Three days into isolation, I had realised I wasn't who I thought I was. This was a crisis. I was no recluse: I hated being alone and dishevelled. I hated being unable to offer input, no matter how stupid or contrived, on the conversations I heard through the walls, no matter how stupid or hysterical. I especially hated that no one was looking at me. I took a disgraceful number of pictures of myself in various textures of light and was too ashamed to post them online, where everyone had become didactic and grim. There was no

point in looking in the mirror at myself, either—I had read that young women never saw themselves accurately when they looked in the mirror, anyway. I required someone else to look at me and to react to me, no matter how unkempt I was, so that I would know what to feel about myself. My hair grew wilder, and I grew restless, and all online contact meant nothing. I felt as though I had begun to blur.

I realised in solitude that like Tinkerbell, from Peter Pan, I couldn't exist without attention. It was vital for my well-being. Without validation, I was just a strange body housing a thousand scattered thoughts.

The realisation of this chimeric self rolled me down a slow, paranoid spiral. I would sit alone inside my body and wonder for hours who I really was and what I really wanted from myself and how I could ever truly know. I would distract myself by plodding along with work, with Jeanette Winterson—whom I'd started reading out of pure luck and who talks about so many separate selves with so much confidence—with staring out my

**Limbs ponderous, I lay in bed in a sweaty fugue with no memory of ever going to sleep or waking up.**

window at the fixed, white and leafy façade of my neighbour's house, with the abnormally loud birds, or with a grisly line-up of American cult horror. But the betrayal of myself would always return and I would have nowhere to go, feeling like an imposter in my own body and not knowing to whom I should apologise for it. Besides, my cough was worsening.

I had known that the isolation would be self-revelatory—solitude always is. It's not just a matter of being left alone with our thoughts in the silence. We experience silence every day, hours of it—through the night, on the commute, in the

hours of autopilot action that allows our brain to keep ticking along without having to focus or talk or listen. We consider ourselves constantly, our bodies and our ideas and how we appear to those we want to talk to or work with. We think we know ourselves, and we perform who we are, even in silence.

Solitude left me with no one to think about myself through, and I had forgotten any other way of thinking about myself. Without minute to minute impressions guiding me, I was lost. As my sense of self distorted until I had recreated a minor but eerie cult horror in my head, my energy levels plunged, lower than the drowsiness that the doses of prescribed codeine warranted for. Limbs ponderous, I lay in bed in a sweaty fugue with no memory of ever going to sleep or waking up. I dreamed that the neighbour's dogs climbed the trees in the night and perched at my window, and when I awoke to their barking I wasn't sure that it had been a dream. When I lay awake for too long, my arm moved by itself and frightened me awake. A slight fever came and left and came back. My dad pressed

his stethoscope into my back and commanded me to inhale and told me I was fine.

I told him I needed something to make me alert and happy. He told me to take a shower.

It took eight days for my body to shake the cough off well enough for me to leave my bedroom. I emerged like a wild animal exiting a cave. The prospect of the great outdoor—the roof—caused me great anxiety, like a slimy cryptid recoiling from fresh air. Yet there was nothing I wanted more than to find a good patch of direct sunlight, somewhere people could look at me and I could look at them, and look at them looking at me. I needed to be able to perform in the eyes of others, just to feel like myself again.

The hours it took me to repair myself after eight days in isolation are unbelievable. It wasn't just my knotted hair, which took four hours and a great deal of upper-arm strength to fix, or my splotchy face, my cracked lips or the blue rings stamped around my eyes that needed attention. During lows in real life, I have consciously sacrificed how I look to conserve energy for the tasks that are binding—like going to work and crossing things off my list of tasks and forcing down at least one of three meals. In a single week of isolation life, by not knowing how to ready myself for myself, it was as though I had tricked my body into a leaden slump I would have to work methodically to get out of.

Since I've been let out, I've relied on the routine of readying myself for the eyes of others to ground myself amidst the heart-pounding terror of being an unknowable stranger in a body whose inner workings are a mystery. Who is it and what ails it and what does it want? Perhaps future days of solitude will tell, but for now, I take refuge in what I know will work: allowing others to pay me attention and create for me my sense of self.

## BOOKS

# The Indian Nexus

The Nepal Nexus, the updated, translated version of Prayogshala, is an accomplished piece, but it lacks depth in the demystification of events post 2015 constitution.

ACHYUT WAGLE

**“T**he great nations have always acted like gangsters, and the small nations like prostitutes.” This highly political quote doesn't come from a political scientist or politician but from a legendary Hollywood film director, Stanley Kubrick. This rather blunt observation—emanated more from experience than theory—reflects perhaps the truest account of the generic trait of relationships between large and small countries. Of course, there are several seminal theories related to the variation of policy behaviour of the larger and smaller nation-states (see for example, the article by Maurice A. East, 1973, *Size and Foreign Policy Behavior: A Test of Two Models*, *World Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 4), but the fate of smaller states barely seems to have altered for centuries despite the rise of many facets of equality narratives in global diplomacy. The predicament of the smaller ones appears more pronounced when they are adjacent to relatively very powerful neighbours.

Journalist and editor Sudheer Sharma's latest book, *The Nepal Nexus: An Inside Account of the Maoists, the Durbar and New Delhi* (2019), only reinforces Kubrick's almost six decade old epitaph. The book alludes that the main vantage point for all observations contained in the book effectively is New Delhi, not Kathmandu. And except from limited alliterative aesthetics, one wonders why the title is 'The Nepal Nexus' as opposed to 'The Indian Nexus', as it would have been a better suited title. The author baptises it as the book of 'politics and geopolitics' and acknowledges that the English edition is an outcome of 'modified, updated and translated' version of his earlier book in Nepali, the *Prayogshala* (2013), but how much so is debatable.

The work is undoubtedly an accomplished product of the author's hard work and is a very systematic presentation of researched material. He must be praised for at least three distinct characteristics of the exposition. First is the boldness and courage with which Sharma has brought out information, particularly on Nepal-related activities, engagements and movements of India's international intelligence agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) officials. The book in many instances has evidenced and established many incessant hearsays surrounding the RAW's influence, meddling and/or micromanagement into



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Nepal's internal politics whereas in many other cases, shown how futile RAW's own conclusions and strategies have proven to be.

Second, the book has presented facts with verifiable authenticity since, barring a few exceptions, the actors, characters and interviewees of the author are still active in their respective fields. Also, this phenomenon is vindicated by the fact that during the last seven years since the publication of *Prayogshala*, not even a single Nepali politician, security forces and/or RAW operatives came out to refute the claims made regarding their role as mentioned in the book. The detailed facts of the incidents and published references presented with due credit make the work not only a collection of placid journalistic reportage but also a valuable academic product that is in compliance with the global tradition of knowledge creation.

Third, a systematic chronology of political events of the last three decades in Nepal with exact dates, locations and parties involved makes the book an important and citable historical document. It has a lot of flesh for those willing, specifically, to understand origin, culmination and effective dissolution of Nepal's Maoist insurgency, counter-insurgency measures adopted by the governments of different political ideologies, the

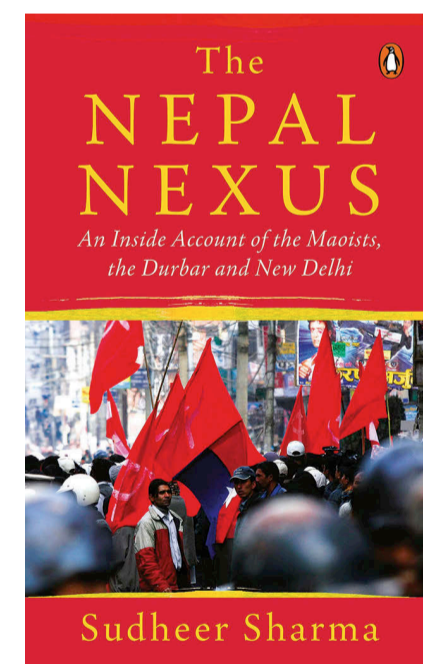
peace process that followed and their mainly political fallouts (as the book is not directly focused on social, economic and other ramifications of the insurgency and ensuing machinations).

As the title of the book suggests, it dwells on the chessboard like moves and strategies of four major political players in Nepal then: the monarchy under two different Kings, Birendra and his brother Gyanendra, the Maoists in rebellion, RAW and mainstream parliamentary party, Nepali Congress in particular. The book exposes a number of antithetic developments during the period. King Birendra's refusal to allow the mobilisation of Nepali army to crush the Maoists despite recommendation of elected Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala for the same and then constantly circulating hypothesis of impending coup d'état allegedly contemplated by the king help explain why the democracy could not take roots under the constitutional monarchy.

In later years of insurgency, as revealed by the book, the Maoists and monarchy worked to come together and strategise to send the leaders of parliamentary parties behind the bars (page 117). Such an industry for collusion between two ideological extremes unmasks both; the republican hypocrisy of the Maoists leaders and the

democratic dogma of the monarchy. Similarly, India's abandonment of two-pillar policy of supporting the constitutional monarchy and multi-party democracy in apparent favour to Maoist agenda and paradigm shifts of the latter from 'expansionist India to ally in making Nepal a republic' bring sheer opportunistic politics sans ideology to the fore. The book—with details of dozens of encounters of high-ranking RAW officials with Maoist supreme Pushpa Kamal Dahal and a few others—unveils not only close contacts between the two but also the treacheries, tactics and tantrums Maoists customised after each of these crucial meetings. In addition, the book also validates the RAW's keen interest and visible involvement in shaping and extending the Madhes movements of 2008 and 2015.

Although, the author at the very outset claims that the book is an updated version of the *Prayogshala*, the rigour and depth in coverage and demystification of the events that unfolded after Nepal promulgated the 2015 constitution seems lacking. One of rationale of the new edition of the book beyond catering the same *Prayogshala* content to the English readers is the update of the developments that took place after the publication of the Nepali version. Chapters 23 to 27 touch upon this critical period, but the depth



**THE NEPAL NEXUS: AN INSIDE ACCOUNT OF THE MAOISTS, THE DURBAR AND NEW DELHI**

**Author** : Sudheer Sharma  
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and breadth of research and inferences seem little diluted compared to the original version. The dynamics of role and expectation of Indian establishment, specifically RAW, after six years of Bharatiya Janata Party in power in Delhi, and strategic rise of Chinese influence in Nepali politics undoubtedly deserved more detailed treatment which is clearly only suboptimal.

Sharma's somewhat sweeping conclusion that India is hardly willing to change and maintains the tendency 'to indulge in one experiment after another in Nepal, at the heart of which lies its desire to have a state of 'controlled instability', where no single force is decisive, so that Nepal's dependence on its neighbour persists and it can guide the country where it sees fit' (page 471). This 'experimentation' perhaps is unlikely to last very long as rapidly changing geopolitics of the region is making a transformation from 'controlled' to 'competitive' a new imperative even for India.