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Women wearing face masks walk at Lagankhel in Lalitpur on Wednesday. Authorities have urged the public to strictly follow safety protocols, including wearing masks, as Covid-19 cases rise.

Stuck at home after losing job to pandemic, migrants from monsoon-hit areas face difficult road to recovery

Remittance has played a crucial role in disaster recovery. But Covid-19, which has left many workers jobless, has now made it much more challenging to recover from disasters.



A house struck by landslide at Satbise in Besishahar Municipality-7, Lamjung.

TSERING NGODUP LAMA KATHMANDU, AUG 5

For the past three weeks, the only thing that has been on Hom Bahadur Thapa's mind is a massive boulder sitting on a sloping hill, roughly 100 metres above his house. The boulder had come tumbling down the hill during a landslide on July 12.

In Thapa's village of Niharey in Gulmi district, every year monsoon means heavy rainfall—and then rain-induced landslides. This year was devastating.

When local government officials came to inspect the landslide area, they told Thapa what he already knew-another landslide would send the boulder tumbling down, crashing into Thapa's house.

"They said it was too risky for us to continue living in the house," Thapa, 29, told the Post over the phone from his village in Gulmi. So Thapa took his family of five to a neighbour's place in the same village.

A migrant worker, Thapa returned to Nepal on May 10 in the midst of the pandemic and lockdown.

"Had it not been for the pandemic, I would still be in Malaysia, working at a gloves manufacturing factory," said

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ing hefty airfares. The one-way airfare on the Kuala Lumpur-Kathmandu flight cost each returnee Rs45,000, which they hardly earn in a month. Thapa, however, was not much worried after he landed in Nepal after

Thapa. "Because of Covid-19, I

couldn't renew my passport, which

left me with no option than to return.'

is with his family in these times of

The only solace for Thapa is that he

Hundreds of migrant workers who

were either laid off or given unpaid

leave were forced to return home pay-

losing his job.

"But the landslide has completely changed everything," said Thapa, the sole breadwinner in his family. "Now that I don't have a steady source of income, how am I going to build a new house or arrange a safe place for my family to live in and feed them?"

Like Thapa, many migrant workers from villages of Sindhupalchok, Gulmi and Lamjung—where this year's monsoon has caused extensive damage to life and property—have lost their jobs due to Covid-19.

Unemployed, many of them are likely to face huge challenges as they try to recover from the disaster.

Nepal has always been vulnerable to natural disasters. According to the United Nations Development Programme, globally, Nepal is ranked fourth, eleventh, and thirtieth in terms of vulnerability to climate change, earthquake, and flood risks, respectively.

This year, according to the Nepal Disaster Risk Reduction Portal, which compiles data on the country's natural disasters, between June 12 (when the monsoon started) and July 12, landslides, floods and lightning

strikes claimed 112 lives. Landslides alone claimed 76 people, the highest deaths recorded so far. "Nepal continues to see devastating

monsoons every year because apart from rescue operations and providing immediate relief materials for victims, we haven't done anything that would help prevent such disasters, said Madhukar Upadhya, a climate change adaptation expert. "The damage caused by water-induced disasters foreign employment."

Every year as monsoons wreak havoc in the country, the money that migrant workers like Thapa send back home helps their families cope with and move on from the damage caused by disasters.

How important a role remittance plays in disaster recovery was very evident in 2015, the year Nepal experienced devastating earthquakes. That year, Nepal received \$6.6 billion in remittance money. The amount was 20.9 percent more than in 2014.

According to Nepal Rastra Bank, the significant increase in remittance inflow was because of migrant workers sending money to rebuild houses damaged by the earthquakes and for their families to cover basic household expenditures.

But the Covid-19 pandemic is having an all-round effect—on disaster recovery to remittance earnings.

According to a report published by the Asian Development Bank on August 3, due to the global economic slump caused by Covid-19, Nepal could see a 28.7 percent drop in remittance

"Without continuous remittance flows, remittance-dependent households can fall into poverty or have difficulty meeting basic essential needs, as well as access to education and health services. Loan repayment is another challenge for remittance recipient households," the Manilabased multilateral funding agency said in its report.

In Thapa's family, the first one to leave for foreign employment was his

"For many years, my father worked as a security guard in Chennai, India. The money he sent home helped cover our family's expenses," said Thapa. "When I turned 22, I told my father, who was already in his 50s, to leave his job and return to Nepal."

When the father came back, Thapa went to Malaysia.

"It was my turn to take care of the family," said Thapa. "From Malaysia, I could manage to send home anywhere between Rs 15,000 and Rs 20,000 a

Four years after working in Malaysia, Thapa managed to save enough money to renovate his old house and add one more room.

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As Covid-19 cases rise, government scrambles to contain the virus flare-up

As new measures to curb the virus spread, authorities impose odd-even rule for vehicles in the Valley and other districts with over 200 cases and bar social gatherings.

KATHMANDU, AUG 5

On Wednesday too, at 4:15 pm, Dr Jagshwor Gautam, the spokesperson for the Health Ministry, appeared on television, gave the latest figures on the number of Covid-19 infections, active and recovered cases, and the number of deaths due to the coro-

Before concluding his press briefing, which he conducts every day, he urged all to take precautions, view everyone else as a person who has been infected, suspect everyone regardless of who they are-friends, acquaintances or unknown peopleas a coronavirus carrier, wear masks and maintain physical distance. His "not-to-do" list was long.

What, as usual, Gautam missed was an update on available hospital beds, what measures the government, or his ministry for that matter, is going to take in the immediate future and how it plans to contain the virus and treat people. Wednesday, Kathmandu Valley has reported 787 Covid-19

cases, according to the Health Ministry. "The national Covid-19 tally has

reached 21,390, with 60 deaths," said

In Bagmati Province, where the Kathmandu Valley falls, there are 800 active cases, according to the Health

Gautam admitted that the cases have been rising at an alarming rate. Kathmandu's government hospitals

are already overwhelmed with Covid-19 patients, with no beds available for new patients. "We will keep all asymptomatic

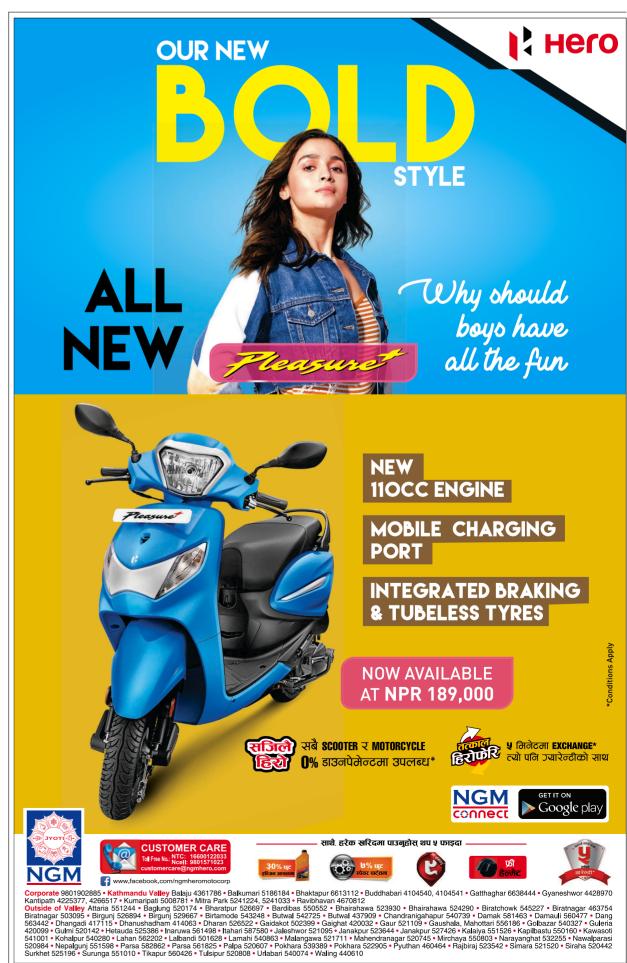
patients at their homes," Gautam told

the Post. "If the number of cases continues to surge at the current rate, severely ill Covid-19 patients could die if they don't get beds. According to the Epidemiology and Disease Control Division, which keeps track of Valley's Covid-19 cases, as of

5pm Wednesday, 103 new cases were reported. Of them, 62 are from the Valley—57 from Kathmandu and five from Lalitpur. The rest were from various districts who are in the Valley for various purposes, according to the divi-

An official at the division said they are still working to arrange beds for those who tested positive.

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NATIONAL

THE KATHMANDU POST

Local units across country reimpose lockdown measures following rise in Covid-19 cases

Most districts have reported new cases since the nationwide lockdown was lifted in July, prompting local governments to step up containment measures.

Most local units in the country have started reimposing lockdown measures following a rise in the number of Covid-19 cases. There has been a surge in cases since the nationwide lockdown was lifted from the midnight

In Province 1, local units like Dharan Itahari, Duhabi and Inaruwa have declared complete lockdown for at least a week starting Wednesday. In the last few days, these local units have reported transmission of the coronavirus at the community level.

On Wednesday, an executive meeting of the Dharan Sub-metropolis decided to reimpose the lockdown for a lack of a better alternative to curb the virus transmission, according to the sub metropolitan office. Strict measures will be adopted for at least a week with fines imposed on the public if found violating the submetropolis' directive. According to Bed Narayan Gachhadar, mayor of Duhabi Municipality, the bazaar area and the municipal office have been sealed to the public.

"We will have to ensure that the lockdown order is executed effectively. Anyone found violating the order will be fined Rs 5,000," Gachhadar said.

Authorities have yet to come up with concrete plans to help business owners.

Rajan Mehata, mayor of Inaruwa Municipality, said reimposing lockdown was a necessary move to stop the community spread of the virus.

In Province 2, only two of the eight districts remain open after authorities decided to impose prohibitory orders following an explosion of coronavirus cases in the prov-

However, for the locals, the lockdown means subsequent financial ruin. For the past four months, businesses have had to close their shutters and people have struggled for a lack of income. Small roadside businesses are among the worst-hit by the lockdown and these businesses are likely to suffer more with the reimposition of the

Chhotu Sah Pahalwan, a local of Kalaiya Sub Metropolis in Bara, sells snacks at Bharat Chok. His business was hit hard by the four-month-long lockdown, and he had just resumed business about two weeks ago when the prohibitory order was imposed in the metropolis. For the last four days, Pahalwan hasn't been able to wheel his cart

out to the market to make a sale. "We somehow survived the four months of lockdown. We lived on the bare minimum,' said Pahalwan, who is the sole breadwinner can make money. I hadn't been able to sell much in the past weeks but at least I was selling enough to provide for my family. But now I can't even do that."

Mithalesh Sarraf, a shop owner in Kalaiya bazaar, has had to close his business because of the prohibitory order.

"I sell electric fans and summer is the only time when I make money. But this year I haven't been able to sell much since I haven't opened my shop this summer," he said. "The authorities should come up with alternatives to this lockdown. We can't put our lives on

Market areas of Kalaiya, Jitpur Simara, Nijagadh, Kolhawi, Mahagadhimai, Simraungadh and Parwanipur, among other areas in Bara, have also been shut for the past four days until further notice.

"We survived the lockdown but we're not sure if we will come out unscathed out of this second phase of lockdown measures,' said Gauri Prasad Jayasawal, who runs an eatery in Kalaiya Ward 5.

"My business has gone kaput. I see no signs of recovery if we are to stay under lockdown indefinitely. It's time the government comes up with a better plan to help us survive the effects of the pandemic.

However, none of the authorities have so far come forward with concrete plans to help small business owners tide over the financial crisis, said Jayasawal.

On Sunday, the District Administration Office in Bara had imposed an indefinite prohibitory order in many parts of the district due to a spike in coronavirus cases.

The number of positive cases has been adding up every day, leaving the district administration with no other alternative than to execute prohibitory orders, says Chief District Officer of Bara Rudra Prasad Pandit.

"New cases of coronavirus are being reported on a daily basis and it'll only get worse if we don't act now. The administration had to impose a prohibitory order in the district to stop the further spread of the virus," Pandit said.

Besides banning small businesses from operating in the midst of the pandemic, the Bara administration has also stepped up its inspection of large industries to ensure that they are adopting health and safety protocols. Jagadamba Enterprises and Maruti Pharmaceutical Industry were sealed and barred from operating until further notice after a few Covid-19 cases were reported from their offices on Wednesday.

"We have also started inspecting other industries, and those found not adhering to health and safety protocols will be sealed,' said Pandit.

Kailari Rural Municipality in Kailali has also declared an indefinite lockdown from Thursday. The rural municipality, which shares its border with India, has struggled to curb people's movement across the border since the nationwide lockdown was lifted.

"We have to reimpose the lockdown to stop the unwanted movement of people," Lajuram Chaudhary, chairman of the rural municipality, said. "An executive meeting held on Wednesday decided to reimpose complete lockdown in the rural municipality for an indefinite period."

Meanwhile, local authorities in Nuwakot of Bagmati Province and Syangja in Gandaki Province on Wednesday decided to extend the prohibitory order for an indefinite period. The two districts had imposed prohibitory orders last week.

The District Administration Office in Nuwakot decided to extend the order after two coronavirus cases were identified in Bidur and Kakani on Wednesday.

Jhankanath Dhakal said, "We have extended the prohibitory order to contact-trace and identify possible patients."

Likewise, Ganga Bahadur Chhetri, chief district officer of Syangja, said, "Syangja has reported 59 coronavirus cases since the lifting of the lockdown. The recent cases are without a travel history, indicating community transmission of the virus in the district. Putali bazaar, Galyang and Arjun Chaupari areas, where recent cases were reported, are currently sealed."

With inputs from our local correspondents.



The District Administration Office on Sunday imposed an indefinite prohibitory order in several parts of Bara due to a spike in coronavirus cases.



INVITATION TO BID (ITB)

PROVISION FOR SUPPLY OF PPE ITEMS TO UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND NEPAL (ITB No. UNFPA/NPL/20/001)

- UNFPA Nepal is seeking bids from registered organizations and firms for the provision of supply of PPE Items to United Nations Population Fund
- Eligible organizations may obtain the ITB and related documents from https://nepal.unfpa.org/en/submission/supply-ppe-items-united-nationspopulation-fund-nepal
- Completed Technical and Financial bid along with copies of documents in accordance with the ITB must be emailed to bid.nepal@unfpa.org no later than 3 PM Wednesday, 12th August 2020 (Nepali time).

Surkhet farmers want compensation for locust devastation

Maize planted in around 3,500 ropanis of land was destroyed in locust attacks in June and July but authorities are yet to come forward to help farmers tide over the ordeal.

KALENDRA SEJUWAL RAMGHAT (SURKHET), AUG 5

When Mankali Sunar first heard reports that locust swarms were making their way into Nepal after eating their way through vast tracts

of farmland in India, she hadn't imagined the insects would reach her fields. It was mid-June-- and just about two months ago, Mankali had finished planting maize in two

ropanis of land in her village of Ramghat in Surkhet district. But on the third week of July, a cloud of locusts invaded her farming village and

devoured the crops "The maize had just about begun to sprout. The locusts destroyed them all. We cut the plants down to the stalks and fed them to the animals,' said Mankali. "With no harvest this season, it's going to be difficult for us to survive."

In case of a good harvest, the maize crop would have fed Mankali and her family of six for about two months.

The locust attack this year has left many farmers like Mankali in Ramghat, Sitapur, Kareli, Belchaur and Rampur villages in Bheriganga Municipality Ward 13 at a loss. The locust swarm that entered the area from India on July 18 and 19 has reduced the farmers to look at alternatives to put food on their tables.

The affected farmers had anticipated support from the authorities to help them tide over, but no help has arrived so far.

A few days after the locust invasion, a technical team led by Chitra Bahadur Rokaya, chief of Directorate Of Agriculture Development in Karnali Province, had reached the Ramghat to assess the situation and to engage with farmers to find possible ways to minimise the damage.

A couple of days later, Minister for Land Management, Agriculture and Cooperatives Bimala KC had also reached Ramghat and met with the farmers. None of the visits made by government officials has borne any benefits to

According to the municipal ward office, maize crops planted in around 3,500 ropanis of land belonging to 563 families were destroyed by

Tikaram Subedi, ward chairman, said an assessment conducted by a local development organisation had concluded that 1,982 quintals of maize crops were destroyed due to locust invasion in Ward 13 of the municipality.

"Maize is a staple crop for the locals in this area. Most of them grow their own maize for consumption but this year most granaries are empty," said Subedi. "We are planning to submit the damage report to the municipality and the provincial government. But we don't yet know if



The locust invasion crippled around 40 percent of maize crop in several districts of Karnali Province.

there will be compensation for the farmers, since none of the government authorities has come forward with a proposal.' The farmlands in Ward 13 do not have irriga-

tion facilities. The farmers rely on rainwater to grow their crops. The lack of alternate sources of water for their fields leave them with very little choice of food crops they can grow. "So most farmers only plant one type of crop,

mainly maize, during the plantation season to see them through the year. But this year the farmers are left with nothing," said Subedi.

Durga Bahadur Dangi, a farmer of Sitapur, suffered less damage compared to Mankali. His farm, spread over five ropanis of land, did not suffer complete annihilation. However, not a single plant in his field this year has a good kernel. "The locusts devoured the tassels and ears of

the plants leading to a bad harvest," said Dangi. "The locusts had covered the whole field. We tried our best to chase them away but failed. For two days, the insects devoured our crops and we could do nothing.'

According to Directorate Of Agriculture Development in Karnali Province, the locust attacks in June and July damaged around 40 percent of maize production in several districts of Karnali Province. Ramghat area of Bheriganga Municipality Ward 13 was the hardest hit area by locust invasion.

Rokaya, the chief at the directorate, said most farmers in Ward 13 will not have a good yield

According to the data available at the ward office, the local farmers had planted maize in about 20,500 ropanis of land while paddy was planted in around 270 ropanis. Millet was also planted in a few ropanis of land.

Rokaya said the locusts did not damage the paddy much but destroyed the maize and millet

Uma Malla of Belchaur had also planted maize and millet in 12 ropanis of land this summer. "We generally sell surplus maize and millet each year, but this year the locusts destroyed the crops," she said. The farmers have demanded compensation

for their damaged crops. "The local unit has to step in to facilitate talks

between the provincial government and us in order to settle compensation amount," said Dangi, the farmer from Sitapur.

Among the farmers, the ones with smaller plots of land are the ones in need of immediate compensation from the government. Gopilal Sunar has a six-member family he has

to provide for. He goes to India frequently to look for work because farming alone cannot feed his But this year, he could not go to India because

of the coronavirus pandemic. "The locusts destroyed the crops and the coro-

navirus pandemic has shut down my prospect of going to India to work," said Gopilal.

'Nobody has come to our aid. Our situation is getting worse by the day and we have no one to

As Covid-19 cases rise, government ...

>> Continued from page 1

'We don't know how we are going to find beds as we are getting new cases every day," said the official who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not allowed to speak to the media. "Moreover, we are still unable to contact around one and a half dozen people who tested positive yesterday.'

Public health experts say the more Covids are being re fused the government looks.

"The situation could soon go out of control," said Dr Baburam Marasini, former director at the Epidemiology and Disease Control Division. "After failing to upgrade health infrastructure, the government is now planning to ask Covid-19 patients to stay home. This could result in an explosion of cases." The government plan to ask Covid-19 patients to stay at home too doesn't seem to be part of a studied decision.

Doctors say a lack of preparation and failure to recognise the threat, coupled with ad-hocism, could spell a disaster and government officials seem to be oblivious to what is writing on the wall. Home isolation is a much more complicated process than the way the government officials have been portraying it, according to them.

Authorities have to conduct an assessment of homes of infected people to allow them to stay in home isolation and monitor every day to ensure that others are not at risk. Given the government's resources and wherewithal, this simply seems impossible, as cases have been rising at a steady rate, a doctor said.

"Isolation of the infected people is the only way to contain the spread of the virus," said Dr Sher Bahadur Pun, chief of the Clinical Research Unit at Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital. "This is a critical time for the government and it should start preparing to set up isolation facilities instead of mulling allowing infected people to stay in home isolation."

Public health experts for long have been urging the government to start preparing for the worst case scenario

Many say the conflict within the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP) too added to confusion, as Prime Minister KP Sharma's Oli's fight with his rival--the other chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal—also put governance by and large on the back seat.

Since Oli takes the lead in almost all decision-making, without paying heed to even his Cabinet members and experts, not much preparation could be done during the fourmonths of lockdown, a period doctors say could have been used to set up quarantine and isolation facilities, increase hospital beds, train health workers and expand testing.

Gautam told the Post on Wednesday that Covid-19 patients could also be kept at the Nepal Army and Nepal Police hospitals, as well as quarantine facilities where suspects were housed in the past.

'The number of isolation beds that we have today, however, may not be sufficient in the coming days," said Gautam.

A scrambling Health Ministry is now trying to find a way to contain the rise in cases. It has sent a proposal to the Cabinet for a "semi-lockdown" in Kathmandu Valley.

According to officials, the ministry's assessment is that the Valley has seen a sudden surge in Covid-19 cases since the lockdown was lifted on July 21. "To prevent the situation from going out of

control, we have proposed semi-lockdown

immediately," a senior official at the ministry,

Post. "We hope that the Cabinet will pay heed to our proposal to prevent a possible catastrophic situation." According to the official, the ministry's proposal to impose a semi-lockdown entails shutting down public transportation servic-

es, hotels, restaurants and roadside eateries where people gather in masses without maintaining physical distance. The ministry has also urged the Cabinet to shut gyms, beauty parlours, barber shops and massage centres, which it says are operating

lockdown was lifted. The ministry has also proposed restrictions on public movement. The government on Wednesday evening decided to impose the odd-even rule for vehicles starting Thursday in Kathmandu Valley as well as all other districts that have report-

despite not getting permission even after the

As per the latest decision, the odd-even rule has been enforced for public and private vehicles plying inside Kathmandu Valley and other districts with more than 200 active cases, according to Umakanta Adhikari, deputy spokesperson for the Home Ministry.

ed more than 200 Covid-19 cases

The ministry has also barred vehicular and public movements from 9pm to 5am.

"The rules apply to all three districts of Kathmandu Valley and districts with more than 200 active cases," said Adhikari. "Except for essential service vehicles, all other vehicles should follow the odd-even rule.

The Home Ministry also said vehicular movement has been barred from 9pm to 5am in all those districts where the odd-even rule is applicable. The ministry has barred all kinds of gatherings—parties, seminars, feasts and other social gatherings at hotels and restaurants. Public health experts say the authorities

seem to be realising the threat level now but they are still making knee-jerk reactions, like in the past, and are failing to respond in a proper way. A complete lifting of the lockdown was a mistake, and now after the surge in cases, restrictions may work to some extent but putting infected people in home isolation could be risky, according to them.

"Asking people to stay in home isolation is risky, as family members could be infected who then could transmit the virus to neighbours and to the community," said Marasini.

"There is still an opportunity to build isolation facilities if the authorities work on a war footing. Hotels, lodges and party palaces should be converted into isolation facilities. Keeping the infected people in complete isolation is the only way to contain the virus

Chandan Kumar Mandal contributed reporting.

Stuck at home ...

"I spent a big chunk of my savings on the house," he said. "Now I don't have savings. Nor do I have a house where my family can feel safe."

In Lamjung's Tarapu Pallotari village, after a few days of incessant rainfall, the first landslide occurred on the night of July 20. Two days later, on July 22, another landslide struck the village. One of the hous-

"The landslide occurred in the morning and nobody was hurt," said Asami, 25.

Like Thapa, Asami too is a returnee migrant worker. He returned to Nepal on March 5 from Saudi Arabia, where he worked at an air cooler servicing "My plan was to stay at home for a month and then

head for Kuwait to work at a company where a few of my friends were employed," said Asami. "Just a few weeks after my arrival, the lockdown happened and I have been stuck here since." Asami's first stint as a foreign migrant worker was

in India, at a slaughterhouse in Aligarh in the state of Uttar Pradesh. He was only 16 then. "Had it not been for foreign employment, our family

would still be living in poverty," said Asami. "Ever since my brother, who is now in Dubai, and I have been old enough to work, we have both been relying on foreign employment to support our family." After working in India for four years, Asami

returned to Nepal, got his passport and flew to Qatar. Four years ago, with the money the Asami brothers had saved, the family had built the house, which was buried in last month's landslide. "We spent around Rs 600,000 for the house. It was all our savings, and all of it is gone now," said Asami. "To

make matters worse, my brother has been laid off by his employers, whose business suffered immensely due to Covid-19. As soon as international flights resume, he will return to Nepal too." Remittance is a mainstay of Nepal's economy. In 2019, Nepali migrant workers sent home

\$8.1 billion, accounting for 27.3 percent of the country's gross domestic product, according to the World The money earned by Nepalis abroad, especially in the Persian Gulf and Malaysia, has been instrumental in the economic empowerment of rural households

like those of Thapa and Asami. For many like Thapa and Asami, this time, things have taken a turn for the worse as there was a double

blow-Covid-19 and monsoon-induced disasters. Both Asami and Thapa are aware that building a new house is out of the question.

"To build a house you need money, which we don't have," said Asami, who has already started building a temporary shelter out of wood and corrugated sheets for his family to move in. "I hope this pandemic gets over soon so I can go abroad to work and send money home so we can move on."

For Thapa, not a day goes by without worrying about arranging a safe shelter for his family and finding a job for himself so that he can continue to provide for his family.

"If I don't find a steady source of income soon, I'll have no option but to move my family into our own house," said Thapa.

Thapa knows very well that the big boulder sitting on the sloping hill 100 metres above his house can come tumbling down any time. But it's a risk he may have no choice but to take, he said.

NATIONAL



People from the Newa community observe Ropai Jatra in memory of deceased family members, and to pray for a good paddy harvest, in Khokana, Lalitpur on Wednesday.

200 firms sell fake VAT bills worth Rs 15 billion leading to huge tax evasion: Revenue probe department

The racketeers who sold the fake VAT bills have been found to have registered firms in the name of poor and ignorant people from rural areas so that they can avoid being indicted by law enforcement agencies.

PRITHVI MAN SHRESTHA

In the latest fake VAT bill scandal, the revenue investigation department has uncovered a major case that showed that bills estimated to be worth Rs 15 billion were sold to different firms, causing huge losses to the national revenue.

"About 200 firms have been found to have sold fake VAT bills worth around Rs15 billion to different 1,100 firms," said Dirgha Raj Mainali, director general at the department of Revenue Investigation, which has been investigating the latest fake VAT bill scandal nearly a decade after the first such case was exposed.

The modus operandi of those who sold such bills is that they produced such bills in large scale and sold to various firms by charging a certain percentage as commission, according to Beverages, a multinational company, which is the bottler of Pepsi, Diet Pepsi, Seven-Up, Mirinda Orange, Mirinda Lemon and Mountain Dew.

In December last year, the department had filed the case against the company at the Kathmandu District Court on charge of evading tax amounting to Rs 649.60 million.

Mainali had told the Post at the time that the company had issued cheques in the name of firms that had sold the fake VAT bills to the company. These firms returned the amount after deducting eight percent commission on those bills.

According to the department, it has so far filed over 100 cases against sellers and purchasers of fake VAT bills worth around Rs7.5 billion. The department has filed cases against both sellers

and purchasers of the fake VAT bills.

On July 15, the department filed a case against



FILE PHOTO COURTESY OF DEPARTMENT OF REVENUE INVESTIGATION

Even though the last fake VAT bill scandal was exposed in 2010, people are found to have engaged in such practices as early as 2014, revenue investigation officials say.

the value of the bills.

The purchasers of such bills, in turn submitted tax details claiming that they paid VAT for procuring goods. But, in fact, the purchasers of fake VAT bills didn't purchase any goods. It means, the VAT supposed to go to the state coffer never reached the government's account.

The racketeers who sold the fake VAT bills have been found to have registered the firms in the name of poor and ignorant people from the rural areas, so that they could legally come out from any legal obligation if indicted, according to the department officials.

Many poor farmers and illiterate people are defendants in the case filed by the department at district courts and high courts.

"Racketeers have used around 150 such people to register the firms and opened the accounts in their names in the banks but the racketeeters have got the responsibility of signing the cheques," said Mainali.

After amendment to Revenue Leakage Control Act last year, it can file cases at the high court, from initially the district courts.

Unlike in the past fake VAT bill scandals, many large business houses have so far not been exposed to be involved in the scandal so far except a few ones

One of the big companies that has been accused of evading tax by using fake VAT bills is Varun

19 individuals involved in nine firms including Ma Baishno Trade Concern at the High Court, Lalitpur, for selling fake VAT bills amounting to Rs2.16 billion and contributing to tax evasion. On the same day, three people involved in another four firms faced charge of tax evasion for purchasing fake VAT bills worth Rs615.42 million.

In March last year, the department had filed a case at the Kathmandu District Court against 24 individuals on the charge of evading taxes amounting to Rs1.75 billion by producing and issuing fake VAT bills.

Even though the last fake VAT bill scandal was exposed in 2010, people have been found to have engaged in such practice as early as 2014.

"This shows that measures taken to control such practice were not sufficient," said Bidyadhar Mallik, former minister and finance secretary. "This also shows that the thief is one step ahead of the government."

According to him, even after the scandal was exposed a decade ago, the software system that could track such transactions could not be up to the mark.

In December 2017, the tax authority installed a cloud-based software system that tracks transactions in real time. But, this system has not connected all the points of sales.

"Sometimes, personal interest of the tax officials and the intervention of the politicians

above them also help to promote such anomalies," said Mallik.

The tax authority has been strengthening its system to track the practice of evading tax. But, officials at the tax authority admit that the existing software system is not enough to track all the malpractices.

"In fact, the latest fake VAT scandal was identified by studying the practices of some firms in our system," said Mukti Pandey, deputy director general at the Inland Revenue Department. "But, this system cannot identify all the malpractices that happen in the market and we also track such activities manually."

In fact, during its investigation, the Department of Revenue Investigation had found weaknesses in both the Inland Revenue Offices and banks for failing to notice 'suspicious transactions' in the names of the firms that were selling the fake VAT bills.

"These firms were found to have done transactions worth millions of rupees within a month of their establishment while there was none in another month. The Inland Revenue Offices failed to notice such unusual behaviour," Mainali said.

He said the tax authority has not been able to take prompt action even after finding unusual behaviours of taxpayers which allowed such malpractices to flourish.

"In the case of the new fake VAT bill scandal, some chartered accountants and auditors who know the loopholes in the tax system, have aided the racketeers," he said.

In June last year, the department had filed tax assistants—Lalitraj Kandangwa and Gauri Mainali and auditors—Jagannath Gurung, Sharan Bahadur Khadka and Tanka Nath Nepal for aiding and abetting the racketeers.

The business community says that there has been massive improvement in the software system adopted by the tax authority which can trace malpractices. "Those involved in malpractices can be traced either from sellers or purchasers. But, the problem here is that the malpractices are flourishing due to collusion between the officials and the people involved in such practices," said Kush Kumar Joshi, former the president of Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

Joshi, who is also president of National Business Initiatives, a non-profit organisation which works to promote responsible business practices, said that the government's effort to introduce electronic billing systems starting from department stores and dealers of vehicles, would help control tax evasion.

The government, implemented since December 2017, connects the point of sale to the computer of the Inland Revenue Department over the internet. Each time sale is made and sale receipt is issued, the transaction is recorded in real time by the taxman. The system is expected to to reduce the possibility of tax evasion and under invoicing. But experts say that it is not possible to enforce the system on all the traders.

"It is because small retailers don't have knowledge and resources to use such a system," said Mallik.

He said that as the malpractices happen from customs points to the retails, he stressed that a comprehensive software system accommodating all the government entities responsible for collecting revenue, should be introduced to properly track malpractices.

Nepalis in Beirut shaken after deadly explosion

No casualties have been reported among the Nepalis, honorary consul based in the city says.

CHANDAN KUMAR MANDAL

Jenny, a Nepali migrant worker, had a normal Tuesday in Bikfaiya, a Lebanese town around 26 km west of the capital Beirut. As the day came to an end, she was resting in her room when she heard a powerful explosion at around 6:30 pm local time (9:15

The explosion in the port area of Beirut left Jenny, who has been living in the Western Asian country for nearly five years, scared as millions of people across the globe, including her, found out what had happened.

"My town is nearly an hour away from Beirut. But the explosion was so powerful that it felt like it took place in my neighbourhood," Jenny told the Post over phone. "I immediately looked out from my window to see what had happened."

The Tuesday evening explosion that rocked Beirut has killed at least 100 so far and left several hundreds injured. The blast ripped through the capital city's port area leaving behind a trail of destruction.

Window panes were shattered and buildings damaged even several kilometres away from the incident site. The explosion was even heard in the neighbouring island of Cyprus, around 240 kilometres away from the Lebanese capital. Nepalis living and working in the coun-

try were in a state of shock following the powerful blast, which the local authorities said was caused by an estimated 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate left unsecured in a warehouse in the port area.

"God, I am saved! I hope Nepali brothers and sisters living in Lebanon are safe too,"

Chandra Joshi Suman, wrote on her Facebook soon after the blast. "I am nearly four km away from the blast site, but I could feel an earthquake. There is not a single undamaged building here. Windows have been shattered."

Soon after visuals from the blast went on

social media, concerns were raised for the safety of Nepalis living in the country, where they have been migrating for work and also posted under UN peacekeeping forces.

"I was at work when the blast occurred. It

felt like a 10-Richter earthquake," said Ashok Thapa, who has been living in the country for 11 years. "We all got scared and thought it was a big bomb. When we came out, we could see a red smog in the air. It terrified us, as we used to go around that place on weekends," said Thapa, who is also the president of the Lebanon chapter of the Non-Resident Nepali Association.

Thapa said that a Nepali migrant worker, Roja Tamang, suffered a cut on her left hand, after the blast. "The rest of the Nepalis are safe."

The blast also damaged the building that houses the Honorary Consulate of Nepal in the city. Mohamed Ghouzayel, Nepal's honorary consul general for Lebanon, told the Post the country hosts nearly 5,000 Nepalis, including workers and peacekeeping forces.



A woman stands inside a damaged restaurant a day after an explosion hit Beirut, on Wednesday, Residents of the city are stunned, sleepless and stoic in the aftermath of the explosion.

The country hosts nearly 5,000 Nepalis, including workers and peacekeeping forces.

"We have not received any reports of Nepalis suffering any injuries until now," Ghouzayel told the Post on Wednesday afternoon. According to Ghouzayel, around 2,000-3,000 Nepalis work as domestic help, around 1,000 as factory workers and the rest are serving as peacekeepers.

Following the blast, hospitals in Beirut have been struggling to treat thousands of people wounded in Tuesday's explosion that damaged property worth \$3billion.

The country, dealing with spirals of the economic crisis since last year, has been hit hard by the global Covid-19 pandemic. First the pandemic, and now the explo-

sion has left Nepali workers' families worried about their safety in the country. After Covid-19 cases once again spiked in the country, the Lebanese government, last week, reimposed Covid-19 restrictions for two weeks.

"After my families watched visuals from the explosion, they started calling me," said Jenny.

"My mom has been crying since yesterday. They want me to return home. But the country is in lockdown, and I don't know when I can go home."

PUBLIC NOTICE

As a part of MAW's open communications policy, we would like to bring to your kind notice the following information relating to the stories covered by few media regarding the COVID-19 case at MAW premises:

FACT ABOUT COVID-19 CASE AT MAW

One COVID case was observed on last Sunday in the back office of two-wheeler division located in third floor of Malla Complex, Tripureshwor. Thereafter, 61 primary and secondary contacts along with the staffs coming in the office were traced and sent for PCR test, out of them 5 were tested positive. None of the infected are from the showroom. MAW had closed its office for two days and got its office fumigated by the office of Kathmandu Metropolitan City. Now, MAW is now working with 25% staffs in the office. We are in regular contact with infected staffs and all prayers are dedicated to their getting well soon.

SHOWROOMS ARE SAFE AND OPEN

MAW confirms that till the release of this notice, NO CASES have been found in any of our showrooms. All our showrooms are routinely disinfected, regularly fumed, all safety protocols strictly followed, safety materials and gears used, social distancing maintained, customers educated on the safety protocols, and operated with minimum staff. MAW confidently welcomes any authorities to audit showrooms for safety.

MAW'S EXTRA COMMITMENT TO SAFETY

MAW has always taken extra precautions and is always ahead in the health and safety of its stakeholders including customers, employees, and nearest communities. MAW has religiously practiced online meetings, restricted non-essential entries and unwanted movements, encouraged contactless customer dealing including payments, and more safety practices inspired from global companies MAW works with. MAW has get all its staffs insured for Corona. MAW also has internal SAFETY AUDIT COMMITTEE which audits safety at all operation zones and ensures compliances.

We express our gratitude to the response, care, concern, and offer for help we received regarding to this case from thousands of stakeholders and well-wishers which added immensely to our courage and immunity.



MAW Enterprises Pvt. Ltd. Tripureshwor, Kathmandu 6 August 2020, Thursday

EDITORIAL

Time to talk turkev

Address the warnings beforehand to stop an unemployment pandemic.

If Nepal needed a nudge, the fresh warning by the Asian Development Bank is it.

In its latest report released on Monday, the Manila-based lender said remittances across the world could decline by over \$100 billion this year as job losses mount and employers trim payrolls amid the pandemic that has exposed the fault lines in health systems and economies around the world.

Asia, where about a third of migrant workers worldwide come from, could see remittance fall by \$54.3 billion in a worst-case scenario, the report says. 'More severe' effects will be felt where the share of remittances to the gross domestic product and per capita remittances are high along with major migrant origin countries such as Nepal and the Philippines, the report warns.

In the worst-case scenario, Nepal could see an estimated loss of \$2.32 billion based on the 2018 World Bank baseline data, when Nepali migrant workers sent home \$8.29 billion. The worst-case scenario assumes that the pandemic is contained domestically and that economic activities resume within a year. However, there is no certainty as to how soon the economy can return to normal as Covid-19 cases continue to spike after the relaxation and lifting of the lockdown

The money sent by Nepali migrant workers is equivalent to around 27 percent of the country's gross domestic product. What has been clear from the start is that a global recession in the wake of the pandemic would directly impact Nepal's flow of remittance, and there would be a decline in outmigration. But the government has failed to take cognisance of the situation that continues to deteriorate by the day.

Dismissive attitudes, given the recent rebound in remittance figures from mid-May to mid-June to put off previous warnings of a slump, could be costly if we see current developments with a myopic eye. While the data from the next few months will give us telling figures, it is understandable that the drop in remittances from mid-March to mid-April coincided with lockdown measures both at home and in destination countries.

Pinning on China's oil demand for a demand for workers in destination countries could be a comfortable cushion to lean on and diverge issues at hand, but labour researchers have long made it clear that the dip in oil prices below \$40 per barrel by the end of 2015 saw a decline in remittance from oil-producing countries. The pandemic, needless to say, has further suppressed global demand for oil causing an additional blow in destination countries which are major hosts to Nepali migrant workers.

The Migration in Nepal report estimates over 400,000 Nepali migrant workers in Qatar, followed by Saudi Arabia 334,451, the United Arab Emirates 224,905 and Kuwait seventy thousand. An estimated 500,000 Nepalis also work in Malaysia, and some 3 to 4 million Nepalis are employed in India. With economies taking a direct hit, a significant number of Nepali migrant workers are out of a job, and they are not likely to be employed anytime soon. Labour researchers say it could take two to three years for the situation to normalise, and the government should be on its toes to handle the returning migrant workers.

The latest warning also adds that newly recruited migrants and those who were on vacation at home face bleak prospects of losing their jobs. Already, the new batch of Nepali migrant workers bound for the Republic of Korea and Qatar have been asked to put off their departures until further notice. If the government doesn't address these multiple warnings beforehand, it could be too late to stop an unemployment pandemic, which will push the country further into chaos and poverty.

It's time to talk turkey.

Distractions of their own making



What KP Oli and Pushpa Kamal Dahal seem to have forgotten is the sorry state Nepal is currently in.

DEEPAK THAPA

ASILIKE



As I had alluded to in one of my earlier columns, there are those who, having come to power, readily succumb to the 'great man's disease'. That is when a politician assumes that winning an election has somehow conferred on him (and, it is mostly a him) god-like omniscience. That is clearly the affliction of our prime minister, KP Oli, who has throughout both his prime ministerial stints taken to launching into impromptu lectures without consideration of the audience, including at times providing 'scientific' advice to a room full of scientists. His performance in Parliament in early June when he asserted that a supposed Nepali exceptionalism resulting from our geography and food habits have made us resistant to viruses, corona or otherwise, is a classic instance to prove true the old saying: 'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing'.

Oli is not the only leader who has tried to explain this world now being shaped by the Covid-19 pandemic. Angela Merkel was likewise guilty early on. The difference, of course, was that unlike the ridicule heaped on Oli for stringing together bits and pieces of what he has read and heard into a cellor was universally praised for her sound knowledge of how the virus spreads and also for her ability to use that understanding to explain the various steps the lockdown would undergo in her country. Merkel was not relying only on her own scientific background (she has a doctorate in chemistry, after all) but instead being fully aware of what she does not know, she consults with experts all the time before opening her mouth.

It was thus a pleasant surprise to learn that on Tuesday, when he had called in a host of public health and other experts for a chat, our prime minister decided to shut his trap for a change and instead listened to what those with a better handle on the coronavirus had to say. That is a role Oli certainly is not used to and was something that appeared to take the conferees off-guard as well. This changeover can only be an admission by Oli that things are not going right with his government's handling of the pandemic, a fact obvious to anyone save his devoted

Among the latter is the Minister for Health, Bhanu Bhakta Dhakal, who had declared that the government has outperformed 'powerful countries' and that all those criticising this record must have clouded vision. It turns out that it was he himself who suffered from faulty sight since less than a week later, Dhakal had to go on record to warn of a 'catastrophic situation' in the Kathmandu Valley with the rise in infections. That both propositions cannot be true at the same time seems to have been lost on the minister, who went even further to say: 'If something sparks in Kathmandu, that will lead to an explosion in villages and small

Underscoring Dhakal's point, on the same day, the Health Ministry also warned those above 60 and children populated areas like Kathmandu. There was also a half-hearted crackdown on those venturing outside without masks, with fines of Rs100 imposed on the errant. The messaging from the authorities has always been mixed, however, as seen in a timely photo collage in Kantipur, which showed the flagrant disregard of the mask rule by the high and mighty, starting with the prime minister himself.

It cannot be that these individuals who rule over our lives and who are supposed to act like role models have not grasped the elementary fact that no matter what kind of quackery people like Oli may peddle, each and every one of us is susceptible to the Covid-19 virus and there is no knowing who the carrier could be. Considering how close it has hit the Indian establishment, with the home minister there himself hospitalised, it is most likely only a matter of time before our own leadership is felled one by one. Unless this laissez-faire attitude among the top political, bureaucratic and security brass changes, the fight against the current pandemic will be an uphill one, with a lockdown followed by an easing followed by another lockdown, then another easing and so on, in a continuous cycle. Different towns have already gone into lockdown mode, and that is a situation other places are likely to be forced into before long.

The tragedy is that during all the time the nation has been grappling with this public health menace, the political leadership's attention has been somewhere else. In early May, after the political crisis precipitated out of the blue by Oli's introduction of two unnecessary ordinances had abated, Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali heaved more than a sigh of relief when he said: 'We were under a lot of tension since our mind had been diverted for the last two weeks or so. No one can facing corona. The environment has now been created for us to concentrate on our main mission'

Little did Gyawali or anyone else know that the venality of our politicians is such that even three months later, that tussle between a prime minister with the stubbornness of a bull and a challenger, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, with the tenacity of a bulldog would continue to hold the country hostage to their personal whims. Just the juxtaposition of news about Covid-19's rampage across the country and images of an unnaturally high death toll due to floods and landslides this monsoon alongside the by-now tedious update on which politico met whom and where and for how long, day after day, should have shamed both into reaching some kind of compromise. That is, if shame were a quality that could be associated

I do not think it has been commented

on, but so caught up has the government and the ruling party been in this battle of attrition (of our country, not of their seemingly endless energy) that even little humane gestures have been completely forgotten. I am referring to the usually pro-forma notes of condolence that would be put out by both the heads of state and government over the loss of lives following the natural calamities that strike us every year. So far, we have not heard a squeak or seen a tweet or press release from either. That probably has everything to do with the entire focus of these two staunch allies being on this perennial squabble within the Nepal Communist Party, into which the president has willingly let herself be drawn. Even the kings of yore would have perfunctory messages of grief, even if it was actually their secretariat that did so in their name. Surely, reaching out to people in pain cannot be beneath the comrade duo at the highest levels of gov-

Zimbabwe's outlaw regime

By arresting a prominent reporter, the government has once again used the law as a political weapon.

TAWANDA MUTASAH



On July 20, the Zimbabwean authorities arrested the internationally renowned investigative journalist Hopewell Chin'ono and charged him with 'incitement to participate in public violence'. But Chin'ono's real crime was to expose—in collaboration with Mduduzi Mathuthu, another journalist now facing arrest—alleged procurement fraud at the health ministry involving Covid-19 medical

Chin'ono's revelations led a reluctant Emmerson Mnangagwa, the country's president, to eventually fire health minister Obadiah Moyo. But whereas Moyo was granted bail following his arrest, Chin'ono remains in detention awaiting trial.

After Chin'ono was arrested, Magistrate Judith Taruvinga signed an overly broad warrant allowing the authorities to search his home for 'illegal documents and other articles kept at the house'. About 30 armed police, brandishing an additional warrant, later raided Chin'ono's home and seized his camera. By contrast, Moyo was subject to no such raids or

By arresting a prominent corruption-busting reporter, the Zimbabwean government has once again demonstrated its intention to use the law as a political weapon to criminalise journalism. Finally, the international community is seeing behind Mnangagwa's lofty rhetoric and recognising the true nature of his regime.

For all his attempts to burnish his government's international image, Mnangagwa is simply following the authoritarian playbook of his longtime predecessor, Robert Mugabe. This should come as no surprise: Mnangagwa had been Mugabe's special security assistant for 40 years before becoming president following the 2017 military coup that deposed his mentor.

When Mnangagwa began what he unabashedly calls his 'reign', an international community exhausted by Mugabe's villainy was hankering for rapprochement and partnership. Investors envisaged a new era in which the authorities would implement predictable rules, clean up pervasive corruption, and rein in rent-seeking officialdom. Mnangagwa played along, declaring that Zimbabwe was 'open for business'

Just over two years later, however, Mnangagwa's pretence has fallen apart. Matching Mugabe's cruelty and entitlement, but lacking his erstwhile patron's eloquence and intelligence, Mnangagwa has revealed himself to be a clueless buffoon with a cartoonish sense of his own invincibility.

The world can now see clearly what was always obvious to discerning Zimbabweans: the 2017 coup was no act of self-renewal by the ruling ZANU-PF party, but rather stemmed from the impatience of a political heir eager for his own turn to maim, steal,

After all, how can the regime claim to be open for business following its treatment of Chin'ono, whose exposé alleged that Mnangagwa's son was connected to the procurement scandal? What 'second republic' and 'new dispensation' bombast can still sound meaningful after government security



agents' recent abduction and sexual assault of three young female opposition leaders, who were then arrested for supposedly faking the episode? What posturing about political reforms can be sustained when the regime, continuing where Mugabe left off, has gunned down peaceful demonstrators, manipulated elections, and committed torture and other crimes

under international law? The regime knows that charging Chin'ono with inciting public violence is legal hot air, so it is punishing him through pretrial travesties. As Amnesty International's Deprose Muchena has observed, Chin'ono's

arrest and detention are part of a broader attempt by the Zimbabwean authorities to persecute the regime's

Recently, for example, Zimbabwe's chief justice issued judges with a directive requiring that their judgments be 'seen and approved' by their superiors before being issued—a patently unconstitutional instruction, given that judges must be independent. Although the chief justice dropped the word 'approved' the following day, and later, following an outcry, seemed to withdraw the entire directive, the purpose remains clear. In addition, human-rights lawyers

have recently been arrested on spuri-

ous charges

Meanwhile, Zimbabwe's woes continue to multiply. Alex Magaisa, a lawyer, recently described how extensive official looting of a state-run agricultural support scheme had resulted in massive public debt. This followed earlier revelations by the opposition MP Tendai Biti that billions of dollars had been diverted from a separate 'command agriculture' programme. With nurses striking in a collapsed health-care system, and parts of the country's hungry population calling for mass protests, the regime is in full panic mode.

The arrest on July 31 of several peaceful protesters, including internationally renowned writer Tsitsi Dangarembga and student Panashe Sivindani, rounded off a month of citizen discontent, during which Mnangagwa also announced stricter Covid-19 lockdown measures for an indefinite period. Even in a context of rising infections, the draconian rules prompted the United Nations to express concern about a possible authoritarian clampdown. The new directives impose a curfew from 6:00 pm to 6:00 am, and require all 'non-working' Zimbabweans to stay at home during the day-at a time when formal unemployment is above

The Zimbabwean regime thrives on graft and lies. Mnangagwa uses the law and institutions of justice not as the testaments they should be to the ideals of belonging, fairness and dignity, but as carrots and knobkerries to wield as he sees fit.

Such behaviour has now created an environment of lawlessness and injustice that is causing responsible investors to think twice about putting their money in Zimbabwe. When a regime shoots itself in the foot, as the one in Harare is doing, the foreign investment that comes to the country is typically crudely extractive: blood contracts calculated to hollow out its natural resources in exchange for supporting its rulers with tanks, guns, and ammunition, other tools of political and social repression, and fat personal bank

Mutasah, former Senior Director for Law and Policy at Amnesty International and former Global Director of Programmes at the Open Society Foundations, is a faculty member at Sciences Po's Paris School of International Affairs.

MONEY

Gold cruises to new high above \$2,000/oz

Gold extended its rally above the key \$2,000 an ounce level on Wednesday, hitting a fresh record high as a weak ening dollar and falling returns on US bonds added fuel to a buying spree among investors looking for a safe store of value.

With the coronavirus pandemic roiling markets, gold has now surged 34.5 percent this year and is one of 2020's best performing assets

After breaking above \$2,000 for the first time on Tuesday and hitting a new high of \$2,041.33 an ounce earlier on Wednesday, spot gold was up 1.1 percent at \$2,040.50 by 1020 GMT.

US gold futures climbed 1.8 percent

'There's a level of fear in the markets which is almost palpable," said independent analyst Ross Norman. "Momentum is feeding on itself, based upon real concerns about the failure of the macro economy to show any meaningful signs of

Silver prices also surged, jumping 3.2 percent to \$26.84, the highest since

Silver, which is both a safe-haven asset and widely used in industry, has now risen 50 percent this year, outperforming even gold.

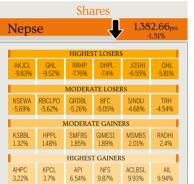
FOREX US Dollar 142.30 Pound Sterling 11.36 Japanese Yer Chinese Yuan 33.01 86.67 Malaysian Ringit 28 67

PRICE PER TOLA **BULLION**

Rs 101,400 Rs 1.295

Saudi Arab Rival

32.05



GASOLINE WATCH



Businesses laid off a quarter of employees, trimmed 18 percent pay during the lockdown, survey says

The survey showed that half of the companies' business is financed by debt and they were unable to pay their employees as their cash flow dried up.

SANGAM PRASAIN

The four-month-long lockdown imposed by the government to prevent the spread of Covid-19 pandemic forced 61 percent of businesses to close down completely, causing a dire effect on the economy by rendering tens of thousands of people jobless and disrupting the production and supply chain, according to a survey released on Wednesday.

Businesses laid off one-fourth of their employees during the lockdown period that lasted for four months.

The survey conducted by the central bank—Nepal Rastra Bank—shows that only 35 percent of businesses operated partially while 4 percent operated fully during the lockdown period. The small and medium scale enterprises and early-stage startups were badly hit, according to the survey titled: The Effect of Covid-19 in Nepal's Economy, which was prepared particularly for the monetary policy for this fiscal year.

Nepal imposed a complete lockdown on March 24 to contain the spread of coronavirus. The nationwide lockdown was lifted on July 21

The three-week-long online survey started on June 8 and covered 52 districts involving 674 industries, business entrepreneurs and startups, according to the central bank.

The survey shows that 22.5 percent of employees were laid off by businesses—that includes manufacturing and service sectors. Two-thirds of laid-off employees were either working on a contract basis or were hired temporarily.

The hotel and restaurant industry appears to have laid off most of its employees during the lockdown peri-



The hotel and restaurant industry appears to have laid off most of its employees during the lockdown period, followed by small and medium scale enterprises.

od, followed by small and medium scale enterprises

According to the survey, hotels and restaurants, which saw almost zero visitors since the lockdown, laid off 40 percent of employees. The small and medium scale enterprises laid off 30.5 percent of their employees. The educational institutions laid off 5.6 percent of employees—which the survey said was the lowest by the sector.

On average, industries and businesses trimmed 18.2 percent off their payroll, with hotels and restaurants coming in the forefront, followed by transport entrepreneurs and educational institutions. However, the average pay cut by the large business

enterprises was 22.5 percent as compared to 13.6 percent by the medium

According to the survey, hotels and restaurants cut employees' salaries by 36.4 percent while transport entrepreneurs cut 31.2 percent. The educational institutions cut 21.1 percent of their employees' salaries while the health and social sector cut the lowest 5.4 percent of their employees' pay.

From the survey, 96.7 percent of business firms responded that they saw their business transactions or production falling by 73.8 percent as compared to a normal time. However, 0.9 percent of business firms said that their production and sales levels rose

HIGHLIGHTS

- The survey shows that 22.5 percent of employees were laid off by businesses
- The hotel and restaurant sector laid off 40 percent of employees, followed by small and medium scale enterprises which laid off 30.5 percent of
- Businesses trimmed 18.2 percent of employee payroll on average
- The average pay cut by big businesses was 22.5 percent, against 13.6 percent cut by medium
- Hotels and restaurants cut their employees' salaries by 36.4 percent, followed by transport entrepreneurs 31.2 percent and the educational institutions by 21.1 percent
- The respondents of the survey said that it would take at least nine months for businesses to normalise, while for hotels and restaurants, it will take at least 13 months
- More than 82 percent of businesses decided to continue their business after the lockdown
- More than 77 percent of business firms did not have enough cash flow to pay employee salaries,
- rental fee and bank's loan interest ■ The average debt-to-capital ratio of businesses in Nenal stands at 48.7 percent
- Most of the companies plan to take out loans, reduce employees' pay to reduce the company

by 15.4 percent. The respondents of the survey said that it would take at least nine months for most businesses to normalise. The survey painted a bleak picture for hotels and restaurants as they have been hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic with respondents saying it would take at least 13 months for the industry to recover.

While 82.3 percent of industry and

business firms decided to continue their business after the lockdown, several have decided to switch to other areas or close their business permanently. The survey says that 77.2 percent of business firms did not have enough cash flow to pay employees' wages and salaries, rental fees and bank's loan interest and instalment. Around 80 percent of business firms said they would take loans from banks and financial institutions to run their

The survey showed that the average debt-to-capital ratio of companies and industries in Nepal stands at 48.7 percent or half of the businesses of the companies are financed by debt. This ratio is also known as financial

"The higher the debt-to-capital ratio, the riskier the company is. In this context, as per the survey, it shows that most of the companies in Nepal are funded by debt rather than equity, which means a higher liability to repay the debt and a greater risk of forfeiture on the loan if the debt cannot be paid on time," said Gunakar Bhatta, spokesperson for Nepal Rastra

"They need to go for share capital to absorb the financial shock in the future. This will also ensure their sustainability," he said, adding that the Covid-19 pandemic showed that most companies were unable to pay their employees within a few months of the lockdown. "If companies can manage to boost their equity ratio, it will ease the burden to borrow loans.'

The survey said that most of the companies were planning to take out loans, cut employees' pay to reduce the company expenditure and find a new strategic investment partner after the lockdown is lifted.



POST PHOTO: KABIN ADHIKAR

Virgin Atlantic airline files for US bankruptcy protection

ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK, AUG 5

Virgin Atlantic, the airline founded by businessman Branson, filed on Tuesday for protection in US bankruptcy court as it tries to survive the virus pandemic that is hammering the airline industry.

The airline made the Chapter 15 filing in US federal bankruptcy court in New York after a proceeding in the United Kingdom.

A spokeswoman for Virgin Atlantic said the bankruptcy filing is part of a

court process in the United Kingdom to carry out a restructuring plan that the airline announced last month. The process is supported by a majority of the airline's creditors, and the company hopes to emerge from the process in September, she said.

A fruit vendor waits for customers at Chabahil Chowk, Kathmandu, on Wednesday.

A Virgin Atlantic lawyer said in a court filing that the company needs an order from a US court to make terms of the restructuring apply in the US

The airline is primarily a long-haul operator, including flights between the UK and the US It stopped flying in April due to the pandemic and only resumed flights in July. It closed a base at London's Gatwick Airport and cut about 3,500 jobs.

Branson appealed to the British government for financial help earlier this year—even saying that he would pledge his Caribbean island resort as collateral for a loan—but was rebuffed.

Last month, Virgin Atlantic announced that it had put together a deal to raise 1.2 billion pounds (nearly \$1.6 billion at current exchange rates) from private sources, including 200 million pounds from Branson's Virgin Group.

Atlanta-based Delta Air Lines, which owns 49 percent of the airline, agreed to defer payments it was owed, and hedge fund Davidson Kempner agreed to lend Virgin Atlantic 170 million pounds. Virgin Atlantic also delayed deliveries of Airbus jets.

Virgin Atlantic's court moves follow bankruptcy filings in the US by Latin America's two biggest airlines, Latam and Avianca, and by Mexico's Aeromexico since the start of the pandemic. Virgin's sister airline Virgin Australia filed for protection from creditors in its home country in April.

More businesses in India reopen even as Covid-19 cases surge REUTERS

India reported on Wednesday 52,509 new cases over the novel coronavirus, taking its tally of infections to more than 1.91 million, nevertheless authorities eased restrictions aimed at limiting its spread, allowing gyms and yoga studios to open.

The health ministry said India's fatality rate was now 2.10 percent.

India is one of the world's hardest-hit countries, with nearly 40,000 people dead of Covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus. But the health ministry said India's

fatality rate was now 2.10 percent, the lowest since the outbreak first appeared.

The government has been struggling to stop the spread of the virus while also trying to minimise the eco-

nomic damage and the hardships lockdowns inflict on the poor. Authorities in the financial hub of Mumbai allowed shops in malls to reopen after more than four months of

lockdown, as the number of cases in the city that was hard hit by the outbreak has begun to slowly decline. Cinemas remain closed and restau-

rants in most parts of the country are offering only limited services.

As dollar slides, some investors fret about its status as world's reserve currency

REUTERS NEW YORK, AUG 5

Some investors are worried the US response to the coronavirus pandemic is dealing a body blow to the dollar, potentially accelerating what has so

far been a slow erosion in the greenback's status as the world's dominant reserve currency. Investors and analysts, including billionaire hedge fund manager Ray Dalio and Goldman Sachs Group strategists, are among those who have

spending in recent months could hurt the dollar. At the same time, rock-bottom US interest rates for the foreseeable future and concerns over a potential rise in inflation are denting the dol-

warned that massive US government

lar's appeal. These factors are already weighing on the dollar, which stands 9 percent below its high of the year and notched its worst monthly performance in a decade in July.

Changes that may affect the dollar's reserve currency status "have historically been glacial," said Alan Ruskin, chief international strategist at Deutsche Bank AG. "Lately, they have been speeding up."

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin told CNBC last month that the dollar's status as the world's reserve currency is in the US interest and the administration wants to maintain it.

The Treasury declined to comment further.

The dollar's dominance endows the US with many benefits, ranging from an outsized influence over the world's financial system to giving it the power to flex its muscle abroad by punishing rivals and bringing errant foreign players to heel.

For the world's central bankers, the dollar remains the reserve currency of choice by far. The dollar's share of global central bank reserves stood at around 62 percent in the first quarter, compared with about 20 percent for the euro and 1.9 percent for the yuan, according to the International Monetary Fund.

Foreign holdings of US Treasuries, considered among the world's safest investments, rose to \$6.86 trillion in May.

Past concerns about the dollar's topdog status, including those that cropped up after Standard & Poor's in 2011 downgraded its credit rating of the United States, have proven shortlived, due in part to the lack of a credible replacement.

The main challenger, the euro, has struggled in the face of existential crises and years of subpar growth in the euro zone.

Indeed, during the throes of the coronavirus panic in March, the dollar's dominance was on full display, with investors and governments scrambling for the greenback as they looked for a haven against extreme volatility and uncertainty.

Mohamed El-Erian, chief economic adviser at Allianz, believes there is little imminent danger to the dollar's



US dollar bills at a bank in Westminster, Colorado, United States.

reserve currency status.

"It is hard to replace something with nothing," he told the Reuters Global Markets Forum on Tuesday.

Nevertheless, the dollar has seen its status slowly degrade over the past

central bank reserves falling by about 10 percentage points, IMF data shows. Some market participants worry that recent US actions may tarnish the currency's appeal.

two decades, with its share of global

One concern is the state of US finances. US debt is expected to exceed 130 percent of gross domestic product by 2021, according to Fitch, which revised the outlook on the United States' triple-A rating to negative from stable on Friday.

Although most countries are similarly ramping up spending, US fiscal account deficits were already among the biggest in the developed world before the pandemic hit, Ruskin said.

The concern is shared by Dalio, founder of the \$138 billion hedge fund Bridgewater LP. In a late July appearance on "Fox & Friends," Dalio said he worried about "the soundness of our money.'

"You can't continue to run deficits, sell debt or print money rather than be productive and sustain that over a long period of time," Dalio said.

In a recent blog post last month, he wrote that the dollar's reserve currency status has lagged but may eventually catch up to declines in US competitiveness, trade and production.

WORLD

Global coronavirus deaths exceed 700,000

One person dies every 15 seconds on average.

WASHINGTON, AUG 5

The global death toll from the coronavirus surpassed 700,000 on Wednesday, according to a Reuters tally, with the United States, Brazil, India and Mexico leading the rise in fatalities.

Nearly 5,900 people are dying every 24 hours from Covid-19 on average, according to Reuters calculations based on data from the past two weeks. That equates to 247 people per hour, or one person every 15 seconds.

President Donald Trump said the coronavirus outbreak is as under control as it can get in the United States, where more than 155,000 people have died amid a patchy response to the public health crisis that has failed to stem a rise in cases

"They are dying, that's true," Trump said in an interview with the Axios news website. "It is what it is. But that doesn't mean we aren't doing everything we can. It's under control as much as you can control it. This is a horrible plague.'

In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro has minimised the gravity of the pandemic and opposed lockdown measures, even as he and several of his cabinet tested positive for the virus.

The pandemic was initially slower to reach Latin America, which is home to about 640 million people, than much of the world. But officials have since struggled to control its spread because of the region's poverty and densely packed cities.

More than 100 million people across Latin America and the Caribbean live in slums, according to the United Human Settlements Programme. Many have jobs in the informal sector with little in the way of a social safety net and have continued to work throughout the

Even in parts of the world that had appeared to have curbed the spread of the virus, countries have recently seen single-day records in new cases, signalling the battle is far from over.

Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, Bolivia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Bulgaria, Belgium, Uzbekistan and Israel all recently had record increases in cases.

BRIEFING

Heavy rains pound North Korea

SEOUL: Torrential rains are lashing North Korea, prompting authorities to take steps to minimise damage, state media said. The North's official Korean Central News Agency reported Tuesday that the heavy rain is expected to continue in most of the country until Thursday. It said authorities handling economic a agricultural affairs are taking measures to prevent damage. The places hit by heavy rain include North and South Hwanghae provinces, a major agricultural region, KCNA said. State media haven't said whether there have been any casualties or property damage. The country often suffers heavy damage from summer rains due to poor drainage, deforestation and dilapidated infrastructure. Any extensive damage from heavy rains this year could worsen the North's already-serious economic troubles.

Envoy says Beijing does not want further rise in tensions

WASHINGTON: Beijing does not want tensions with Washington to escalate further following tit-for-tat consulate closures over the past weeks, the Chinese ambassador to the United States said on Tuesday. The world's top two economies should work to cooperate instead of confronting each other, Ambassador Cui Tiankai said, striking a relatively conciliatory tone at the virtual Aspen Security forum. "I don't think a new Cold War would serve anybody's interest," said Cui, seen as a moderate voice among Beijing's top diplomatic brass. "Why should we allow history to repeat ... when we are faced with so many new challenges?" he said, while rejecting US allegations of Chinese spying in the Houston consulate shut down by Washington last month.

Australia says Indo-Pacific alliance 'critical priority'

SYDNEY: Australia Prime Minister Scott Morrison said on Wednesday that building an Indo-Pacific alliance with like-minded nations will be a "critical priority" for his government, warning the pace of militarisa tion in the region was unprecedented. "Today, the Indo-Pacific is the epicentre of strategic competition. Morrison told the Aspen Security Forum, which brings government and military leaders together with experts. "Tensions over territorial claims are growing." The annual conference is being hosted using virtual digital platforms this year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

(AGENCIES)



An army helicopter drops water at the scene of Tuesday's massive explosion that hit the seaport of Beirut, Lebanon, on Wednesday

Fireworks, ammonium nitrate likely fuelled Lebanon explosion, experts say

Online videos of the disaster show sparks and lights inside the smoke rising from the blaze, just prior to the blast.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Fireworks and ammonium nitrate appear to have been the fuel that ignited a massive explosion that rocked the Lebanese capital of Beirut, experts and videos of the blast suggest.

The scale of the damage—from the epicenter of the explosion at the port of Beirut to the windows blown out kilometers (miles) away—resembles other blasts involving the chemical compound commonly used as an agricultural fertiliser.

But the compound itself typically doesn't detonate on its own and requires another ignition source. That likely came from a fire that engulfed what initially appeared to be fireworks that were stored at the port.

Online videos of the disaster's initial moments show sparks and lights inside the smoke rising from the blaze, just prior to the massive blast. That likely indicates that fireworks were involved, said Boaz Hayoun, owner of the Tamar Group, an Israeli firm that works closely with the Israeli governinvolving explosives.

"Before the big explosion, you can

Blast toll climbs to at least 100

BEIRUT: Lebanese rescue workers dug through the mangled wreckage of buildings on Wednesday looking for survivors after a massive warehouse explosion sent a devastating blast wave across Beirut, killing at least 100 people and injuring nearly 4,000.

Officials said the toll was expected to rise after Tuesday's blast at port warehouses that stored highly explosive material.

The blast was the most powerful ever to rip through Beirut, a city still scarred by civil war three decades ago and reeling from an economic melt-

see in the center of the fire, you can see sparks, you can hear sounds like popcorn and you can hear whistles, Hayoun told The Associated Press. "This is very specific behavior of fireworks, the visuals, the sounds and the transformation from a slow burn to a

massive explosion." Jeffrey Lewis, a missile expert at International Studies in Monterey, California, offered a similar assessdown and a surge in coronavirus

President Michel Aoun told the nation the government was "determined to investigate and expose what happened as soon as possible, to hold the responsible and the negligent accountable, and to sanction them with the most severe punishment."

An official source familiar with preliminary investigations blamed the incident on "inaction and negligence", saying nothing was done" by committees and judges to order the removal of hazardous material.

ment. He added that "it's very common to see fires detonate

"If you have a fire raging next to something explosive, and you don't put it out, it blows up," he said.

The white cloud that accompanied the massive blast appeared to be a condensation cloud, often common in tions that can follow the shock waves of an explosion, Lewis said

Orange clouds also followed the blast, likely from toxic nitrogen dioxide gas that's released after an explosion involving nitrates.

Experts typically determine the power of the blast by measuring the crater left behind, which appeared massive in aerial footage shot on Wednesday morning by the AP.

The Beirut blast, based on the crater and glass windows being blown out a distance away, exploded with the force equivalent to detonating at least 2.2 kilotons of TNT, said Sim Tack, an analyst and weapons expert at the Texas-based private intelligence firm

What initially started the fire at the port remains unclear. Beirut was sunny before Tuesday's explosion, with a daily high of 30 degrees Celsius (86 degrees Fahrenheit).

Interior Lebanese Mohammed Fahmi, in comments to a local TV station, made no mention of ignited fireworks but said it appeared the blast was caused by the detonation of more than 2,700 tons of ammonium nitrate that had been stored in a it was confiscated from a cargo ship

Singapore migrant worker mental health in spotlight after self harm incident

REUTERS

A migrant in Singapore who selfharmed and was pictured bloodied in a stairwell has heightened concerns over the mental health of thousands of low-paid workers confined to dormitories in the city-state due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In April, Singapore sealed off sprawling housing blocks where its vast population of mainly South Asian labourers live in crowded bunk rooms, in an effort to ring-fence a surge in virus cases among the workers. Four months on, some dormitories remain under quarantine, and even migrants who have been declared virus-free have had their movements restricted and face uncertainty over the jobs on which their families back home depend.

Rights groups say this has taken a heavy mental toll on workers, pointing to recent reports that migrants have been detained under the mental health act after videos showed them perched precariously on rooftops and high window ledges.

"We've heard of the extreme dis-tress due to the inability to provide for families, inability to service debts to money lenders and banks and inability to fund medical care for children and elderly parents," said Deborah Fordyce, president of migrant rights group, Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2). "Many of the workers now say that the mental anguish is a more serious problem than the virus.'

Singapore has recorded over 53,000 Covid-19 cases, mainly from dormitories in which around 300,000 workers from Bangladesh, India and China are housed. Only 27 people have died from the disease in the city-state.

Authorities have said they expect to lift quarantines on all dormitories this month, with the exception of some blocks serving as quarantine zones, and that 89 percent of workers have either recovered or are virusfree. But reports and images published in local media on Wednesday of a man in blood-stained clothing at the foot of some stairs have fuelled concerns about the mental toll of the lockdowns. Singapore's Ministry of Manpower—which has overseen the quarantines-said it was aware of the incident in which a worker had "harmed himself", adding that he was now in a "safe and stable condition". Police said the 36-year-old man was detained under the mental health act.

Checks had found there was no indication the man was in distress prior to the incident or was owed any salary, the ministry said in a statement, urging workers not to "act rashly" and reach out to non-governmental organisations for help.

The ministry did not immediately have further comment, but referred to previous remarks saying it was workhealth needs of migrants by providing services including counselling

Modi enjoys twin triumphs for India's Hindu nationalists

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation for a temple at a flashpoint holy site exactly a year after imposing direct rule on Muslimmajority Kashmir—twin triumphs for his Hindu nationalist government.

The site at Ayodhya and divided Kashmir have been two of the most divisive communal issues of the past 30 years in India, and Modi has attempted to draw a line under both.

For his fans, both steps confirm Modi-elected to a second straight term in a landslide last year—as a decisive, visionary and heroic leader, and India's most important in

His critics see him as remoulding the officially secular country of 1.3 billion as a Hindu nation, at the expense of India's 200 million Muslims, and taking it an authoritarian direction.

"Modi has certainly been India's most transformative leader in recent memory," Micheal Kugelman from the Wilson Center told AFP. "This has made him wildly popular,

but also highly controversial and quite divisive.' The holy city of Ayodhya in northern India has long been a religious

fault line, and the spark for some of its worst sectarian violence. In 1992, a Hindu mob destroyed a centuries-old mosque there that they

believed had been built on the birthplace of Ram, an important deity. This triggered religious riots that killed 2,000 people, most of them

A lengthy legal battle ensued but in November, in a major victory for Modi's BJP party, India's top court awarded the site to Hindus, allowing a



Women dance to celebrate ahead of a groundbreaking ceremony of a temple dedicated to God Ram in Ayodhya, at Vishwa Hindu Parishad headquarters in New Delhi on Wednesday.

temple "touching the sky" to be built. Wednesday's lavish religious ceremony was shown live on television. Small celebrations took place across

Modi, 69, shared the stage with the head of the RSS, the militaristic hardline Hindu group that is parent to the BJP and which Modi joined as a young man.

"[It's] a huge achievement for [Modi]. He is going to make his position permanently in history purely on the strength of this temple," his biographer Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay

Further cementing Modi's place in his country's annals is Kashmir, divided between India and Pakistan since 1947, the spark for two wars and the source of much bloodshed.

The BJP had long seen the special status enjoyed by the part of Kashmir controlled by India as a historical wrong, and on August 5 last year, Modi abolished it. An accompanying security opera-

tion turned the region into a fortress for weeks with all telecommunications cut and thousands taken into

Even now, India has "maintained stifling restraints on Kashmiris in violation of their basic rights", according to Human Rights Watch.

People from outside Kashmir are now being granted the right to buy land for the first time.

This has ignited fears that Modi wants to change Kashmir's demographic makeup with an Israel-style settler" project.

Sri Lankans vote for new parliament, shrugging off coronavirus fear

Sri Lankans shrugged off fears of the novel coronavirus and streamed into polling centres on Wednesday to elect a new parliament that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa hopes will clear the way for him to boost his powers.

The tourism-dependent island nation of 21 million people has been struggling since deadly Islamist militant attacks on hotels and churches last year followed by lockdowns to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Rajapaksa is seeking a two-thirds

majority for his party in the 225-seat

parliament to enable constitutional

reforms to make the presidency more powerful so he can implement his economic and national security agenda. Voters, who wore masks and kept one metre apart, seemed keen to have their say with a third of the electorate

casting ballots in the first four hours, the Election Commission said. "If they come at this rate we should get between 65 and 70 percent, which

is good given the Covid-19 situation,' said top Election Commission official Saman Sri Rathnayake. Sri Lanka had reported 2,828 cases

of the coronavirus and 11 deaths as of Tuesday, which is small compared with other South Asian countries. Election officials wore transparent face shields while medical personnel

were deployed to ensure voters abided

by rules to prevent the spread of the

coronavirus. "The polling station is safer than the beach, the restaurant and the marketplace," said the chairman of the Election Commission, Mahinda Deshapriya.

Rajapaksa won the presidency last November vowing to restore relations with China.

Rajapaksa won the presidency last November vowing to restore relations with China, which had been strained by disputes over some Chinese investments.

He is hoping to install his older brother who is also a former president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, as prime

The brothers built their political careers as nationalist champions of the majority Sinhalese, Buddhist community. They are best known for crushing ethnic minority Tamil separatist insurgents who battled for decades for a homeland in the island's north and east.

The 26-year civil war ended in 2009 when the elder Rajapaksa was president amid allegations of torture and killings of civilians in the final stages of the conflict.

Since then, governments led by the brothers' opponents have sought to reduce the power of the president to prevent abuses and instead strengthen independent commissions appointed by parliament.

But Rajapaksa said he has felt hobbled since he took over as president. "I need power to implement my eco-

nomic programme which you voted for," he told supporters last week.

BRIEFING

Manchester City sign Ferran Torres from Valencia

LONDON: Manchester City announced the signing of Valencia winger Ferran Torres on a five-year deal on Tuesday. The 20-year-old has signed a five-year contract, for a reported initial fee of £20.9 million (\$27 million). 'I am so happy to be joining City,' Torres said in a statement released by the Premier League club. "Every player wants to be involved in attacking teams and Manchester City are one of the most attacking in world football." They have also agreed a £41 million fee for Bournemouth defender Nathan Ake. "We have followed Ferran's progress closely and have been very impressed," said director of football Txiki Begiristain.

Tottenham to sign Hojbjerg, sell Walker-Peters

MADRID: Tottenham Hotspur have agreed a deal in principle with Southampton to sign Denmark midfielder Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg with full back Kyle Walker-Peters going the other way. British media reported on Tuesday. Hojbjerg is set to move for a fee in the region of 15 million pounds (\$19.60 million) while right back Walker-Peters, who joined Southampton on loan in January, will make a permanent switch for 12 million pounds, according to Sky Sports. Hoibierg, who moved to the Premier League from Bayern Munich in 2016. was stripped of the Saints captaincy in June when the 23-year-old made his intention to leave the south-coast club clear to manager Ralph Hasenhuettl, Walker-Peters, who is also 23 and moved to Saints for more first team action, has played 10 times in the Premier League under Hasenhuettl since his loan move earlier this year. The new Premier League season begins on September 12.

Ireland stuns England in ODI

SOUTHAMPTON: Paul Stirling and Andrew Balbirnie hit centuries to propel Ireland to only its second win over England in international cricket after overcoming the World Cup champions in Tuesday's one-day match. Set a target of 329—the same score they finished on to beat England at the 2011 World Cup—the Irish laid the foundations with a 214 run stand between Stirling (142) and captain Balbirnie (113) in the last match of the series, with 50 still required from 33 deliveries. Kevin O'Brien - the hero nine years ago in Bangalore - fittingly secured a seven-wicket victory for Ireland on the penultimate ball. Earlier, England had stuttered to 44-3 but Eoin Morgan's 106 from 84 balls was the cornerstone of 328 all out in 49.5 overs, the captain sharing a 146-run stand with Tom Banton. England won the series 2-1

Heavyweights set for decisive last-16 showdown

Manchester City, who are yet to win the European trophy, are in prime position to reach the quarter-finals after a 2-1 victory in Spain in the first leg

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

The UEFA Champions League returns on Friday with the remaining places at the final tournament in Lisbon up for grabs as Europe's top clubs look to go all the way and lift the trophy on August 23 after a suspension of five months because of the coronavirus.

A glance at the four outstanding last 16, second legs—all being played behind closed doors-for a reminder of where they stand:

Juventus vs Lyon

(Lyon won first leg 1-0)

It is nearly six months since officials in Lyon questioned the decision to allow the first leg to go ahead as coronavirus cases took off in northern Italy. Yet the game was played in front of almost 60,000 spectators, including nearly three thousand Juventus supporters. Lucas Tousart's goal gave Lyon a surprise 1-0 win on the night, but much has changed since then—for a start Tousart is no longer at Lyon having signed for Hertha Berlin.

Lyon's defeat on penalties to Paris Saint-Germain in last Friday's League Cup final—their first competitive game since March-means they must win the Champions League to qualify for Europe next season. That seems unlikely, but putting out Juventus might not be.

The Old Lady have just won their ninth successive Serie A title, yet there are doubts about Maurizio Sarri's side. Juve won just twice and lost four of their final eight league games, and in Europe they may be reliant on Cristiano Ronaldo's appetite for more Champions League

Manchester City vs Real Madrid (City won first leg 2-1)

Pep Guardiola's City have already claimed one major European victory



PHOTO VIA BARCELONA FC TWITTER HANDLE

Barcelona's Lionel Messi trains ahead of his team's UEFA Champions League last-16 second leg match against Napoli.

this summer after the club's successful appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport which saw their two-year Champions League ban overturned. That may mean they are extra motivated to go on and win the trophy for the first time, even if Guardiola insists "this issue is over'

They are in prime position to reach

the quarter-finals after a 2-1 victory in Spain in the first leg, when Kevin De Bruyne's penalty won the game. Nevertheless they are without the injured Sergio Aguero, and there is pressure on them.

Their campaign was underwhelming domestically and the high point of City's experience in the Champions

which only grew in the 117th minute

when Bryan got forward again and

exchanged passes with substitute

Aleksandar Mitrovic before finding

League so far remains a defeat to Real in the semi-finals in 2016.

Madrid, in contrast, have been there and done it so many times before, winning the competition four times in the last six years alone. Zinedine Zidane's team are fresh

from claiming the Spanish title after an exceptional run of post-shutdown form. However, they must do without Sergio Ramos, who is suspended after being sent off in the first leg.

Bayern Munich vs Chelsea (Bayern won first leg 3-0)

This is surely a formality, with Bayern producing a stunning display to beat Chelsea 3-0 away in February thanks to Serge Gnabry's brace and a Robert Lewandowski goal. The Bavarians picked up where they left off in style when the Bundesliga resumed in mid-May, romping to a league and cup double by winning 11 games in a row post-lockdown.

Their focus should therefore be on a quarter-final against Barcelona or Napoli, while the pressure is off Chelsea after they achieved their aim of finishing in the top four in the Premier League. Frank Lampard's team lost to Arsenal in the FA Cup final last weekend and lost Cesar Azpilicueta and Christian Pulisic to injury in the same game. It looks an impossible task for them.

Barcelona vs Napoli (First leg 1-1)

After missing out to Real Madrid in La Liga, Barcelona—who are looking for a sixth European Cup- cannot contemplate being knocked out of the Champions League already, but they are far from safe against Napoli. They drew 1-1 in the first leg in Italy with Antoine Griezmann cancelling out Dries Mertens' opener, so Barca have the upper hand. However, all is not well at the Camp Nou, with coach Quique Setien under intense

Napoli are a club on the up under Gennaro Gattuso, witness their triumph on penalties over Juventus in the Italian Cup final in June and their recent statement signing of Lille's Nigerian striker Victor Osimhen for a fee that could reach 80

Fulham make Premier League return

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Fulham made an instant return to the Premier League on Tuesday, beating Brentford 2-1 at Wembley in what is regarded as the most lucrative game in world football.

Defender Joe Bryan was the unlikely hero for Scott Parker's side in the Championship play-off final, scoring two goals in extra time after the London clubs were locked at 0-0 at the end of a cagey 90 minutes. Henrik Dalsgaard scored a late consolation for Brentford but it was too little too late for Thomas Frank's team, who have not played in the English topflight for 73 years.

The Craven Cottage club will earn around £135 million (\$176 million) for bouncing back from relegation last season and this result also gives rookie boss Parker a first success of his fledgling managerial career. "We've done what we've done tonight, but there's still improvement, and that's what makes me so proud and happy,' Parker told Sky Sports.

Left-back Bryan broke the deadlock for Fulham in the 105th minute when he made the most of a costly misjudgement by Brentford goalkeeper David Raya. While Raya and everyone else expected a cross from a free-kick 35 yards out, Bryan beat the goalkeeper at his near post to break the deadlock. The goal sparked wild celebrations,

the net again. Promotion was confirmed for Fulham but only after Henrik Dalsgaard had pulled one back for Brentford with seconds to go, heading home after Christian Norgaard had knocked a free-kick across the face of goal. Brentford finished third in the Championship table. The result is a bitter blow for

Brentford, who were on the brink of automatic promotion last month before successive defeats against lowly Stoke and Barnsley forced them to settle for a third-place finish behind Leeds and West Brom

Holder Nadal to skip US Open

NEW YORK, AUG 5

World number two Rafael Nadal confirmed on Tuesday that he will not defend his US Open crown this year at the Flushing Meadows as organisers released the singles entry list for the Grand Slam.

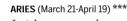
Spain's Nadal had said in June that he had reservations about travelling to the US amid the Covid-19 pandemic and he joins women's world number one Australian Ash Barty in skipping the tournament.

"After many thoughts I have decided not to play this year's US Open," Nadal said on Twitter. The United States has the highest tally in the world with more than 4.7 million confirmed novel coronavirus cases. World number one Novak Djokovic,

a three-time champion in New York, headlines the men's list along with Daniil Medvedev and other top 10 players including Dominic Thiem, Stefanos Tsitsipas and Alexander Zverev. Swiss Roger Federer, a fivetimes US Open champion, will also be absent after the 38-year-old was forced to undergo knee surgery in June that prematurely ended his 2020 season. Nine of the top 10 women's players,

including 23-times Grand Slam champion Serena Williams and holder Bianca Andreescu, are on the entry list along with 2018 champion Naomi Osaka, Simona Halep and Sofia Kenin.

HOROSCOPE





because you have extremely positive feelings about someone doesn't mean everyone else does, so make no assumptions today. If no one is as excited

about them as you are, don't worry about it. You need

Have you ever thought about now you cor

others? Image isn't something that should drive your personality, but it's something you need to consider, especially in your work life. Being aware of how you



LIBRA (September 23-October 22) ***

SCORPIO (October 23-November 21) ****

All relationships are unpredictable from time to time, but today one of your more confusing friendships could get a lot more predictable. Watch out for a clue that will make it simpler for you to guess what this person really wants.



CAPRICORN (December 22-January 19) **** could get in your way around the truth just so you won't hurt someone's

feelings is exhausting, and you might not have the patience for it. If you end up stepping on the toes of one or two people, don't worry

TAURUS (April 20-May 20) ****

to tone down your feelings



Some exciting plans could be on your mind today, and they could be distracting. People are eager for your input on a project at work, but if you're busy thinking about something else, you'll miss out on



Someone you care about could throw a wrench into your plans, and you'll have to do your best to avoid getting angry. Work with them to solve their problem, and you will help remove that wrench and get things



You and a friend have opposing ideas about what to do, and the tension might be getting so hot that you're thinking of cutting them off altogether. What's the best way to solve this problem?



AQUARIUS (January 20-February 18) ***

If you keep your head down today, how are you going to see the opportunities that are parading right by you? Whether you're looking for a new romance, new investment opportunity, or new job, it's out there

GEMINI (May 21-June 21) ****



If you've been struggling to make a decision or confused about which strategy to adopt, today is the perfect day to look at the situation again. Your vision is clear as a bell, and suddenly the right choice could



PREVIOUS PUZZLE SOLVED

NADER

BEDSIDE CRYPT AGAIN CUE

NID

A E T N A R A V E L

SLABS

ASEA

VIRGO (August 23-September 22) ***

NOON

CHAT

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WIGGLED

ARMHOLES

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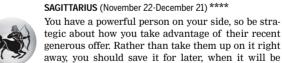
CANCER (June 22-July 22) ***

LEO (July 23-August 22) ***

All you need to fulfill your next life goal is a person, and that person could be coming into your life soon. If you're at work, look for someone who isn't new on the scene but has recently taken on a



Compromise!



much more valuable to you



PISCES (February 19-March 20) ***

Your personal problems aren't bugging you right now because you're probably much more distracted by your friends. Make sure you're contributing your fair share of ideas and energy toward a col-

CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- 5 Boss, briefly 8 On fire
- 15 Before, to Blake 16 Seismic activity
- monarch 19 Polished
- "recent" 25 Open-back
- 31 Understood
- 38 Part of mph
- 41 Oklahoma city 42 Flow back
- name
- 46 Family
- wail

- 1 Irwin of the PGA
- 17 Delhi nursemaid 18 Pierre's
- 20 Drawback 23 Trial figure 24 Prefix meaning
- shoe 29 -Magnon
- 34 Sweet wine 40 Rail securer
- 47 Closed in 49 Sorrowful
- record of
- 33 Go sky-high
- 43 Want-ad letters 45 "Westworld"
- nickname
- 51 Break the

- 54 Adhere 14 Blissful spot
 - (hyph.) 65 Unit of electrical current
 - necklace 69 Kind of ranch 70 Warm up
 - **Great Lakes** 73 Passes out 74 Change color

DOWN

- 2 Allow 3 Car-dealer's option
- 4 Touch up 5 Vanna's boss once
- 6 Ghostly noise 7 Stopped the horse 8 Water

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SUDOKU

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION



CULTURE & LIFESTYLE

Going back to your pre-pandemic routine can be harder than you think

The idea of being out in the social world can be overwhelming, but here is how you can deal with it.

SRIZU BAJRACHARYA

hile the country goes back to business, 22-year-old Dollie Shah is having a hard time re-adjusting to her pre-pandemic routine. She feels awkward and uncomfortable; getting into casual conversation with people makes her feel anxious and agitated.

When the nation went into lock-down on March 24, she quickly adapted to the quiet life, away from people and the social engagement her work demanded from her, partly happy. "I am kind of an introverted person, but my work needed me to be networking with people, and I used to brave a face to get through all the tasks," says Shah, for whom the lockdown was like a much-needed break. She was actually getting accustomed to staying home when the lockdown was called off.

"Now going back to the world after months of being on my own has got me feeling more uneasy and nervous," she says.

And Shah is not alone in this. Many like her are struggling to go back to their pre-pandemic routine. And according to psychologists, this re-adjustment will take time, given the perpetual fear of the virus that surrounds our daily life. "And participating and engaging in interpersonal conversation might become even more difficult for people with social anxiety," says Narendra Singh Thagunna, founder of The School of Psychology Nepal.

According to Thagunna, of the several types of anxiety, social anxiety is often hard to ascertain but is the most common mental health condition. People with social anxiety experience persistent fear of being judged and misunderstood. They feel vulnerable when interacting in social situations, and most often distance themselves away from social interactions. And in a coronavirus-stricken world, they may feel more exposed, worrying fervently on the details of how they might get infected and become a carrier of the virus itself to infect their loved ones.



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Twenty-three-year-old Neha Hada, who has social anxiety, feels more overwhelmed treading out in the open these days, although during the lockdown she yearned to be out in the open. "These days, I get anxious whenever I go out, especially because my father is recovering from a medical condition," she says. Hada also finds it challenging to be in a crowded room.

"I like being around people; it's not that I don't enjoy their company. I am both an extrovert and an introvert, but when with a big group, I find myself becoming a little nervous," she says.

In recent months, the pandemic has

increased feelings of stress and anxiety in people. Thus it's natural for people to feel uneasy going back to the reopening world as the pandemic is still not over, says Parbati Shrestha, one of the coordinators of the clinical team set up by Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) Nepal. "And so, it's also natural for people with social anxiety to struggle re-adjusting to the social world," she says

But the ultimate challenge of dealing with the restlessness, however, might be people not recognising signs of anxiety, says Thagunna.

"Our society is still not aware of

mental health, and so people with social anxiety perhaps don't have an idea about what they are going through," he says.

Many people with social anxiety show symptoms of short breath, palpitation, physical body pain, even nausea and lightheadedness. They may also feel overwhelming exhaustion in a social situation. "Other psychological symptoms can include them avoiding events and interactions, and excessive worrying over what other people will think or notice," says Shrestha.

And although social anxiety's roots are tied to deep fear and stress of being judged, embarrassed or humiliPsychologists say re-adjusting will take time, given that the fear of the virus still surrounds us.

ated, the solution entails gradually opening one's social horizon.

"People with social anxiety have trouble mingling with the social world but it doesn't mean they don't want to interact with people at all, oftentimes situations aggravate when they feel extremely lonely," says Thagunna. "And that is how they can see to go back to society even now."

You can take your time to get back to the world

There's no need to rush to social situations right away, says Thagunna. While the rest of the world may be rushing to normalcy, for people with social anxiety, it's important to address their difficulties first. "Realising comes first before anything. If one can understand what they are going through then one can tackle their emotions," says Thagunna.

Stick with facts and the guidelines People with anxiety might obsessively look at Covid-19 symptoms to see if they have the virus or be the one spreading it. "That's because they are focused on the negative side of the news, they should also be able to see the number of recoveries and facts that help them cope with their fears," says Shrestha. According to Shrestha, the number of callers he receives expressing their Covid-19 anxiety has increased with the lockdown now over and the rising cases in the Valley.

Practise routine

"Routine can help people with anxiety to prioritise and focus on a given task helping them take control of their nervousness with the work in hand," says Thugunna. When Shah realised she was having trouble interacting with people, she started making a point to do little things and stick to a routine that allows her to keep a balance. "Most things are happening inside our head rather than in reality. I try to divide my time to focus on tasks ahead of myself. I work on my to-do list every day, and try to keep myself stimulated," she says.

Keep a diary to pour yourself out People with anxiety often are burned down with negativity. "And so, we often ask people with anxiety to keep a gratitude journal where they can write about what they feel grateful about and at the same time what they experience. It's a release that will help them keep a positive attitude in life," says Thagunna.

Practice mindfulness

According to research, breathing exercises, yoga, mindful meditation—all help to reduce anxiety. It's also one of the most popular recommendations made by psychologists to help people cope with their anxiety. "Mindful meditation helps reduce stress, and the anxiousness people feel," says Shrestha.

Hada believes mindful meditation helps her take a pause from the fast-paced world. "I have been practising mindful meditation for quite some time, and it allows me to focus on myself," she says. "It also helps me with my palpitations and I have tried to be more consistent with this practice," she says.

Find a person to confide in

"It's important for people with social anxiety to have someone who can listen to them," says Thagunna. Sharing one's experiences is one of the most significant ways of making someone feel comfortable and secure, he says. "If one can lend their ear and truly listen to what they are going through they might help the person to cope more better in social situations," says Thagunna.

"Everyone needs a person to ventilate," says Shrestha. "Just having someone to talk to decreases the level of anxiety," she says.

