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WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

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POST PHOTO: HEMANTA SHRESTHA

Nepal national team and officials pose with the trophy after they beat Bangladesh 2-1 in the Three Nations Cup at the Dasharath Stadium in Kathmandu on Monday. (Report on Pg 7)

Oli is paying Nepal faction leaders with their own coin

The UML chair suspends Madhav Nepal and Bhim Rawal as party's general members for six months and asks Surendra Pandey and Ghanashyam Bhusal to furnish clarification.

TIKA R PRADHAN & ANIL GIRI
KATHMANDU, MARCH 29

Ever since the Supreme Court revived the CPN-UML and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) on March 7, KP Sharma Oli, the UML chair, has taken a series of decisions aimed at striking senior leader Madhav Kumar Nepal with vengeance.

On Monday, the UML suspended Nepal, who led the party for 15 years as former general secretary between 1993 and 2008, as well as Bhim Rawal, the party vice-chair, as general members for six months, saying the clarifications they had furnished were not satisfactory.

The party also decided to seek clarification from two other leaders, Surendra Pandey and Ghanashyam Bhusal. Though the party had asked the four leaders to furnish clarification, Pandey and Bhusal had failed to respond.

Until the March 7 court decision when the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) was intact, Nepal, Rawal, Pandey and Bhusal had sided with Pushpa Kamal Dahal and formed their own faction within the party. The Nepal Communist Party (NCP) was formed in May 2018 after the merger of Oli's UML and Dahal's Maoist Centre.

The court order to revive the UML and the Maoist Centre, broke, in essence, the alliance between Dahal and Nepal, as the latter was left with no option than to return to the UML fold under Oli.

The party, in a letter sent to Nepal and Rawal, has stated that they are being given a final chance to mend their ways and work in favour of the party.

"The party can reduce the suspension period if you mend your ways. The party can take further actions if you continue anti-party activities," reads the letter.

Action against Nepal follows his faction's decision to continue parallel party committees as part of its struggle against Oli and what it calls "Oli tendency".

The Nepal faction which recently organised a national gathering of leaders and cadres close to it has been holding meetings of its own leaders separately.

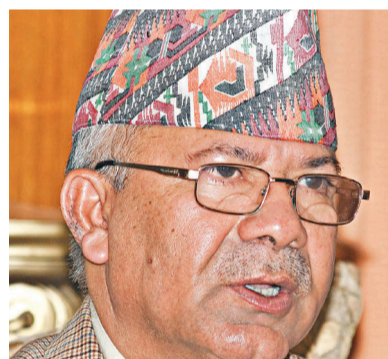
Storm has been brewing in the party for quite a while, as Oli has been trying to tighten the noose around Nepal and other leaders who once stood against him, even demanding his resignation.

After Nepal and other leaders returned to the UML following the court order, Oli amended the party statute, making himself all-powerful in the party.

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Court seeks copies of Nepal's and Bhattarai's Cabinet decisions relating to Lalita Niwas case

The two former prime ministers were among key people spared by the anti-graft body which last year filed graft cases against 175 individuals, including three former ministers.



Madhav Kumar Nepal



Baburam Bhattarai

POST FILE PHOTO

March 14, 2013. The Nepal-led Cabinet had decided to expand the area of the prime minister's residence in Baluwatar by giving certain land to fake tenants.

Such a decision taken by the Cabinet on April 11 could not be implemented due to the refusal of the land reform office as per allegations made by a probe committee. Then, the Cabinet on May 14, decided to instruct the land revenue offices to implement the Cabinet decision.

The Bhattarai-led Cabinet had allegedly decided to register government-owned land in the name of a guthi. As there cannot be tenants in the government lands, Bhattarai-led Cabinet has been accused of facilitating land dealers to get hold of the prime lands through fake tenants.

"Originally, there was no ownership of any guthi in any portion of disputed government land in Baluwatar and there were not a single tenant. But fake tenants were created after bringing certain land under the ownership of a guthi just to give the land to some interest groups," said former secretary Sharada Prasad Trital, under whose leadership the government had formed a probe committee on the Baluwatar land scam.

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PRITHVI MAN SHRESTHA
KATHMANDU, MARCH 29

The Supreme Court has sought copies of the Cabinet decisions taken during the tenures of former prime ministers Madhav Kumar Nepal and Baburam Bhattarai with regards to land transfers of Lalita Niwas in Baluwatar.

Justices Anil Kumar Sinha and Hari Phuyal ordered on Monday that the copies of the Cabinet decisions and other relevant documents, including the proposals that were made in relation to the transfer of government lands in the name of pri-

vate individuals, be presented before the court.

The court was responding to a writ filed by advocate Balkrishna Neupane. Neupane had filed the case on February 10 last year.

The court has asked authorities to present the copies of the Cabinet decisions taken on April 11, 2010; May 14, 2010; April 13, 2010 and October 4, 2012 and other documents through the Office of the Attorney General.

Nepal served as the prime minister from May 25, 2009 to February 6, 2011. Similarly, Bhattarai was the prime minister from August 29, 2011 to

A Qatari woman aims to climb Everest to inspire women in her region

Sheikha Asma Al Thani is on the quest to scale the tallest peaks in the seven continents and reach the two poles. Everest will be fourth of the nine feats.

SANGAM PRASAIN
KATHMANDU, MARCH 29

A Qatari woman is on a quest to complete the Explorers Grand Slam—reaching the summits of the seven highest mountains in the seven continents and the two poles.

After reaching the North Pole, climbing 6,959 metres (22,831 feet) Mount Aconcagua in South America and 5,895 metres (19,340 feet) Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa, Sheikha Asma Al Thani's sight is now set on Everest.

If she climbs the 8,848.86-metre (29,031.69 feet) Everest, she will also be the first woman from her country to climb the mountain and 472nd from the world, from the Nepal side.

A total of 6,507 mountaineers have climbed Everest, which straddles Nepal and China, from the south side since 1953. Junko Tabei of Japan became the first woman to climb it in 1975.

"In April/May this year, I will take on my biggest challenge yet, conquering Mount Everest. I am only the third Qatari to ever attempt the climb and, if successful, I would become the first Qatari woman in history to stand 8,848 [sic] metres above sea level," Asma



POST COURTESY: SHEIKHA ASMA AL THANI
Sheikha Asma first trekked to Everest Base Camp in 2019.

wrote on her website.

Asma, the director of marketing and communications for the Qatar Olympic Committee, is scheduled to land in Nepal on Thursday, her local expedition organiser TAGnepal told the Post.

"After fulfilling the necessary travel

protocol of the Nepal government—conducting the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test after arriving in Nepal—Sheikha Asma will apply for the climbing permit," said Ishwor Dotel, an official at TAGnepal. "She will be spending 45 days in Nepal for the Everest mission."

Asma of the Qatari royal family said she also wants to demonstrate women's empowerment in Qatar while inspiring a new generation of women across the region to dream bigger.

"Through my journey, I aim to shatter the stereotypical image of the traditional explorer and demonstrate women's empowerment in Qatar while inspiring a new generation of women across the region to dream bigger," she wrote on the website.

The position of women from the eight Gulf States—Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—is much behind other countries which are economically on par with them.

Authorities in the Gulf view modernity as achievements in economy, technology and education, while socio-political involvement is seen as problematic.

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NATIONAL



POST PHOTO: TULARAM PANDEY

People take a pick-up truck across the Karnali river on a raft at Palata Rural Municipality, Kalikot. Local residents have to row their way across the river in the absence of a bridge.

Court seeks copies of Nepal's and Bhattarai's Cabinet ...

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On February 5 last year, the Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority filed corruption charges against 175 individuals in relation to the Baluwatar land grab case.

The anti-corruption body, however, spared a number of key people, including Nepal and Bhattarai. The commission did not initiate action against Nepal and Bhattarai, saying even though the decisions to illegally transfer the government land into private hands were taken during their tenures, the decisions constituted "policy decisions", which the commission cannot look into.

"If the court does not recognise those as Cabinet decisions as policy decisions, it will open the door for the commission to prosecute even Nepal and Bhattarai," said Neupane, the lawyer who filed the petition.

Neupane in his petition had claimed that the decision to give the government land to any individual could not be categorised as a "policy decision" and it should not be immune from the anti-graft body's investigation.

Nepal faces a possible prosecution at a time when he has been weakened in the CPN-UML, with Oli tightening the noose around him. On Monday only, the UML suspended Nepal and Bhim Rawal as members of the party for six months.

Nepal refused to comment on the court's order.

Ever since the Supreme Court scrapped the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) and revived the UML and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) on March 7, things have not looked good for Nepal. Nepal had sided with Pushpa Kamal Dahal in the Nepal Communist Party (NCP), but with the court reviving the UML and the Maoist Centre, he was left with no option than to return to the UML fold.

Bhimarjun Acharya, a senior advocate, said the court order seeking copies of decisions taken by the Cabinet of Nepal comes at a time when Oli has suspended him and this does raise some questions.

"Even though the court seeking documents is a normal process, Oli appears to be in a bid to take revenge against Nepal," Acharya told the Post. "Such tendencies of (Oli) may overshadow even the genuine issue (raised in this case)."

Another former prime minister Bhattarai, who is currently chairperson of the federal council of the Janata Samajbadi Party, termed the court order part of regular proceedings but he said that things should be viewed in a holistic way.

"The way Oli has been destroying and controlling all the organs of the state, it will lead the country towards disaster," said Bhattarai, a fierce critic

of Oli. "We must be cautious about Oli's overall activities instead of focusing on tidbits, and if we fail to stop Oli before it is too late, the country will plunge into a crisis."

Many legal experts and anti-corruption campaigners have for long been calling for an end to suspicious decisions which are usually given the cover of policy decisions. As per Section 4 of Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority Act-1991, the anti-graft body cannot investigate into policy decisions taken by the Cabinet.

"This court order shows that it wants to look into this case seriously," said Acharya, the advocate. "Even though the court had earlier defined what a policy decision is, we can expect a comprehensive definition from the court as to what constitutes a policy decision."

Earlier on September 24, 1996, the Supreme Court said decisions taken "collectively" by the Cabinet to fulfil promises made in the election manifesto constitute "policy decisions." Even after that verdict, the Cabinet took controversial decisions with regards to Baluwatar land as well as many other public procurements.

"We need a comprehensive verdict regarding policy decisions," said Acharya. "If the court says the decisions taken by the Cabinets led by

Nepal and Bhattarai are not policy decisions, it opens the door for the anti-graft body to investigate and prosecute these two leaders as well as many other senior government officials."

He said that in such a situation, the anti-graft body should investigate all people linked with the scam without discriminating against anybody.

Former chief commissioner of anti graft body Surya Nath Upadhyay said even if the court decides those Cabinet decisions were not policy decisions, the commission should establish a link between the Cabinet decision and how it benefited those involved in the decision in order to make any prosecution stronger.

The Baluwatar land scam was initially unearthed by a probe committee led by former secretary Trital and the case was pursued by the Central Investigation Bureau of the Nepal Police, before the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority moved the Special Court.

Trital told the Post that whatever decisions the Cabinets led by Nepal and Bhattarai took were not policy decisions.

"These decisions were taken by violating the laws," said Trital. "So all those responsible for Cabinet decisions should be investigated."

(Tika R Pradhan contributed reporting)

Families of two youths who died in a Holi fair demand investigation

A clash broke out during Holi celebrations in Baglung on Sunday, leaving two dead and six injured.

Prakash Baral
Baglung, March 29

Families of two youths who died in a clash during Holi celebrations in Baglung on Sunday have refused to receive the bodies and demanded the arrest of the guilty at the earliest.

According to the District Police Office in Baglung, Prakash Kunwar, 36, and Dipak Pariyar, 34, of Nisikhola Ward No. 7 died in the clash that took place at Baldechaur in Badigad Rural Municipality ward no. 10.

"The bodies of the deceased were found 400 metres from the incident site. Six others have sustained injuries in the clash," said Deputy Superintendent of Police in Baglung Ikawal Hawari.

The post mortem of the bodies was conducted in Burtibang-based Primary Health Centre on Monday.

"We were observing the Holi festival in a fair at Baldechaur. There was a minor dispute which later turned into a violent mob attack. A large number of people started to attack us using batons and stones. We don't know the assailants," said Mithu Pariyar, one of the injured individuals.

A video of the clash became public immediately after the incident but the police have not been able to arrest the perpetrators of the crime.

Following the incident, the deceased's wife had filed a complaint at the Area Administration Office and Area Police Office in Burtibang demanding the arrest of the individuals captured in the video and investigation into the case.

On Monday, an 11-member team, including District Police Chief Krishna Bahadur Pallimagar, reached the incident site to take stock of the situation.

Chief District Officer of Baglung Shiva Kumar Karki has vowed to give full support to the police administration in their search for the suspects.

A few days ago, the local administration had issued a notice not to organise fairs during the Holi festival. But more than 600 individuals had attended the Holi fair at Baldechaur, which lies in the border of Baglung, Gulmi and Pyuthan district.

"The programme was organised without any coordination. We have started an investigation into the matter," said Karki.

Nepal Health Conclave to be held on April 6

Post Report
Kathmandu, March 29

Nepal Health Conclave 2021, an initiative of the media and journalism team at Trikal Productions and health professionals within the US Embassy Youth Council, is being organised in Kathmandu on April 6.

According to the organisers, the event, first of its kind interactive and public discourse on the status of Nepal's health sector, is supported by the Ministry of Health and Population and the US Embassy in Kathmandu.

The event seeks to address challenges faced by Nepal's health sector in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis.

The organisers said in a press statement that the initiative aims to analyse the gaps in national health plans/policies while considering the progress made so far through meaningful and critical conversations with stakeholders, as well as community members.

"The event will be an opportunity for policy reform to strengthen and

reimagine the health system of Nepal," the statement said. "The conclave will bring together government officials, medical professionals, public health specialists, media personnel, journalists, and community leaders to have a productive discussion as part of the following four panels."

The theme of the conclave will be "Aarogyada: Living Healthier Together". This is in recognition that it is within the rights of every Nepali to strive to live a healthier, longer, and happier life, the organisers said.

The Nepal Health Conclave will take place as a physical event for only the speakers and panelists, given the Covid-19 guidelines issued by the government, at Hotel Yak and Yeti.

Additional participants can register to attend the event virtually, as well as put forth questions for the panelists through NHC 2021's website www.nepalhealthconclave.com.

The Post will be the media partner of the event, which will be broadcast live on Facebook and on Kantipur Television.

A Qatari woman aims to climb Everest to ...

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So far only six women from these countries have climbed Everest from the Nepal side despite the wealth they have from oil and natural gas.

On May 30, 2005, Farkhondeh Sadegh, a graphic designer, and Laleh Keshavarz, a dentist, from Iran became the first Muslim women to climb Everest. On May 18, 2012, Parvaneh Kazemi, again from Iran, climbed Everest, according to the Department of Tourism.

Raha Moharrak became the youngest Arab and the first Saudi woman to climb Everest on May 18, 2013.

Mona Kamal Shahab was another Saudi woman who stepped atop Everest on May 23, 2019.

Nadhira Ahmed Abdullah Al Harthy became the first Omani woman to summit Everest in 2019.

"Women from the Gulf states who have climbed Everest can be counted on fingers. These states have seen fewer opportunities for women," said Ang Tsering Sherpa, former president of Nepal Mountaineering Association.

"But things could change. The Gulf states are gradually opening up and promoting women. Everest has been drawing a number of high-profile male climbers from the Gulf states. It's a word of mouth promotion," Sherpa said. "The number of women climbers from the Gulf states could also rise in the near future."

From Qatar to the UAE and from Bahrain to Saudi, Everest could be a big draw for the wealthy.

On Friday, Nepal issued a permit to climb Everest for a royal Bahrain military expedition led by Prince Mohamed Hamad Mohamed al-Khalifa.

The Bahrani prince is following the footsteps of members of the royal families of other countries in the Gulf. Qatari Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulla Al Thani climbed Everest

on May 22, 2013 and also became the first person from his country to reach the top of the world.

Prince Bandar Bin Khalid Bin Fahd of Saudi Arabia had successfully climbed Everest on May 19, 2012 and is also the first Saudi Arabian to climb the seven highest peaks in the seven continents, a feat Asma hopes to emulate.

It costs \$35,000 to \$90,000 for a person to climb Everest depending on the extent of support the climber needs in terms of guides and supplies. This cost also includes the climbing permit cost of \$11,000.

The risks of climbing are not lost on those hoping for success.

"We understand it will be extremely difficult. People die on this mountain. We are not taking it easy," Prince al-Khalifa told the Post last week in an interview. "We are the people living below sea level. Everest is extremely difficult for us. We have trained ourselves vastly but still it is difficult."

It is a similar challenge that Asma of Qatar faces.

But for the moment, she is undeterred and wants to climb not only for herself but also to inspire other women.

"I climb mountains because it challenges my limits. And it is my hope that, by taking on the world's highest mountains, I can challenge the stereotypical image of the traditional explorer and empower women and youth in the region to challenge themselves and dream bigger," Asma said in a press statement before arriving in Nepal.

"Ultimately, I want to become the first woman from the Middle East to complete the Explorers Grand Slam, and summiting Everest is just a milestone on my journey to inspire others to push past their limits, break down barriers and live their dreams," she wrote on her website.

Oli is paying Nepal faction leaders with their ...

>> Continued from page 1

Oli has authorised himself to change those elected to the House of Representatives under the proportional representation system if he wishes so and select office bearers in the Parliamentary Party on his own.

He also scrapped the Central Committee elected by the ninth general convention and formed a 264-member 10th national convention organising committee, maintaining his chairmanship and keeping the post of general secretary intact.

Oli and General Secretary Ishwar Pokhrel were given authority to select new office bearers and Standing Committee of the party.

Insiders say Nepal has been badly cornered in the party by Oli lately.

Monday's decision to suspend Nepal as a general member seems to have emanated from Oli's intention to exact revenge.

When the Dahal-Nepal faction of the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) waged a war on Oli after the latter dissolved the House on December 20, they had expelled Oli as the leader of the Parliamentary Party. Dahal and Nepal had declared themselves chairs of the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) and removed Oli as the party chair in the third week of December. Then in January, they ousted Oli as party's member.

Now with the UML revived, Oli seems to be paying Nepal back with his own coin.

Nepal told the Post on Monday evening that Oli does not have the legal right to take action because the latter is no longer the party chair ever since he "acted against the party statute".

"Ever since he dissolved the Central Committee of UML, his moves have no meaning and they are illegal. I reject and denounce this action," Nepal told the Post. "I would also appeal to all the cadres of the party to stand strongly against Oli's regressive moves."



Insiders say Madhav Kumar Nepal has been badly cornered in the party by KP Sharma Oli.

He said he would counter Oli's moves politically, as the latter is in a bid to end the communist movement in Nepal. "He has an allergy to communist party. This (UML) party is ours and does not belong to KP Oli," he said. "He has no contribution in making the party. So, we will lead the party ahead."

Party leaders have termed Oli's decision to suspend Nepal and Rawal an attempt to split the party if Oli does not correct his decision.

Raghuji Pant, a Standing Committee member, said that Oli's decision to suspend two leaders does not hold any meaning.

"We seriously suspect that Oli

wants to break the party," Pant, who is close to Nepal, told the Post. "Since Oli doesn't hold any legal ground to seek clarification from our leaders, he must withdraw the letters sent to the leaders so as to keep the party united. Such moves by Oli will only escalate tension in the party."

The Nepal faction, according to leaders, will soon hold a meeting of its senior leaders in order to discuss ways to counter Oli.

Oli through the party's March 20 Central Committee meeting had decided to seek clarifications from Nepal, Rawal, Pandey and Bhusal "for their involvement in anti-party activities."

In their clarifications, the four lead-

ers had asked counter-questions to Oli, accusing him of trying to run the party with an iron fist.

In the suspension letter sent to Nepal, the party has said the leader failed to admit his mistakes and introspect and self-criticism.

Oli has pointed to Nepal's anti-party activities and factional politics as other reasons for his suspension.

"There is a possibility of continuation of such activities by you for your own gains," reads the letter. Such activities could create confusion among party cadres. Instead of seeking an apology despite the party giving a chance, you have sought unwarranted and absurd clarifications."

Bhaktapur school's virus report raises concern

Health experts say educational institutions could become coronavirus hotspots if health and safety measures are continued to be ignored.

ARJUN POUDEL
KATHMANDU, MARCH 29

At least 23 students and a teacher of the Nepal Army-run Sainik Awasiya Mahavidyalaya, Bhaktapur have tested positive for Covid-19, raising concern about academic institutions becoming coronavirus hotspots.

Although children are at relatively low risk of developing a severe form of the infection, health experts warn that they could pass on the virus to other vulnerable groups at their homes and communities.

"We have been warning that the academic institutions could become coronavirus breeding grounds and hotspots," Dr Binjwala Shrestha, assistant professor at the Institute of Medicine, told the Post. "We have been asking authorities concerned to strictly implement safety measures and provide vaccines to the teachers first."

A few weeks earlier, Covid-19 cases were detected in 40 students at an engineering college in Pokhara, according to the Epidemiology and Disease Control Division.

"We have managed cases at both places and directed experts concerned to trace contacts of the infected people," Dr Krishna Prasad Paudel, director at the Epidemiology and Disease Control Division, told the Post. "The infected individuals have been asked to stay in isolation and those who came into their close contact have also been tested."

Meanwhile, Sainik Awasiya Mahavidyalaya has been closed for an indefinite period.

The school has been shut down from Monday, the Nepal Army has been conducting contact tracing of the infected students and the teacher," Krishna Bahadur Mijar, chief of the health office in Bhaktapur, told the Post, over the phone. "We have been coordinating with school administration to contain the spread of infections."

Tests of swab samples of those who came in close contact with the infected students and the teacher are being performed at the Army Hospital.

Brigadier General Santosh Ballave Poudyal, spokesperson of the Nepal Army, said the school has shut down from Monday to prevent the spread of the infection.

"In-person classes have been halted. Classes will be held virtually until further notice," Poudyal told the Post.

According to Poudyal, after an administrative staff member of the school tested positive for coronavirus infection, the school had tested the students who had come in close contact with him.

The school had been taking in-person classes

for students of grades 10, 11 and 12 class only.

The government had given authority to local levels to resume in-person classes in December last year, after the number of new cases started declining. Many academic institutions reopened that same month.

The Health Ministry says that schools and local governments are responsible for implementation of the safety measures to prevent the transmission of the contagious disease. However, officials at the ministry are unaware if the safety measures are being followed in schools and colleges.

According to Shrestha, of the Institute of Medicine, even people serving at front desks of hotels and restaurants are getting infected.

From a low of 47 cases on March 6, Covid-19 cases have been steadily rising in the country with 141 new cases reported on Monday.

Officials at the Ministry of Health and Population suspect that the new variant of virus might be responsible behind the recent spate of infections, as spike proteins have been found missing in swab samples of a lot of infected people.

However, whole-genome sequencing has not yet been performed on the swab samples of the infected persons to identify the virus variant.

S-gene target or spike protein is one of the key biological characteristics of SARS-CoV-2, which enables the virus to penetrate host cells and cause infections.

Without spike protein, the coronavirus cannot infect people, but doctors say that if the polymerase chain reaction tests are failing to detect the spike proteins in the swab samples of the infected people or negative s-gene target, there is a possibility that the virus may have undergone mutations or the virus could be of a different variant than the one common in the country.

The new variant of the coronavirus, the one that was identified in the United Kingdom in December, was detected in Nepal in January.

While the exact situation of the spread of coronavirus remains unknown as the authorities have given up on contact tracing since October, the recent outbreaks in educational institutions have alarmed public health experts.

New cases of infection had spiked after reopening of schools in Europe and America, and authorities there had shut down the schools.

"If we continuously ignore the implementation of health and safety measures, educational institutions could become the new hotspots for coronavirus," Dr Prabhat Adhikari, an infectious disease and critical care expert, told the Post.

Education institutions ordered shut for four days, stakeholders criticise delayed response



A domestic flight lands at Tribhuvan International Airport, Kathmandu on Monday. Only a handful of flights landed at the airport on Monday due to poor visibility caused by heavy smog.

ANUP OJHA
KATHMANDU, MARCH 29

After witnessing four days of soaring levels of air pollution across the country, the government on Monday ordered all schools and colleges shut for four days.

But stakeholders—parents and school associations—are not happy with the decision as it was taken without proper consultations and after days passed in uncertainty.

Smoke and haze have been covering Kathmandu and other hilly areas in the country since Friday with weather conditions becoming more severe in the afternoons. The air quality has deteriorated in such a way that Kathmandu became the most polluted city in the world. But the government didn't order schools closed until Monday.

The Ministry of Education, on Monday, directed all schools and colleges to shut down for four days (from March 30-April 2).

"The government should have decided earlier," said Ratnavati Sthapit, 38, a mother of two school-going children. "For the past few days, my kids have been coming home with irritation in their eyes. Their schools should have been shut from Friday," said the beautician who lives in Dhalko.

According to IQ Air, a Swiss Group that

manages real-time worldwide air quality data, Kathmandu's Air Quality Index (AQI) has remained between "very unhealthy" and "hazardous" levels in the last three days with the highest AQI recorded at 411 with PM2.5 at 366 micrograms per cubic metre ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) at 9:45 am on Saturday.

PM2.5 (particulate matter) are tiny particles or droplets in the air that are two and one-half microns or less in size. Such particles are considered hazardous as they can penetrate the respiratory tract and reach the lungs to cause various ailments.

Prem Kumari Mishra from Taudaha, is more worried about the future of her son's health and his studies.

"Last week the government requested people to stay indoors because of bad weather and rising levels of air pollution, but it didn't say anything about closing schools. It should have considered how vulnerable kids are," said Mishra, whose son studies in grade 10.

"Schools were closed for a year due to the pandemic. It's been open for barely three months, and he only has three months to prepare for SEE," said Mishra.

Like Sthapit and Mishra, thousands of parents are worried about their children's health and their education. Schools and colleges

were closed for nine months due to the Covid-19 pandemic last year, and they only opened from the second week of January.

During the early days of the reopening, parents were apprehensive about sending their kids to school as virologists said it was still risky. In recent times, the number of Covid-19 cases has unprecedentedly gone up in neighbouring India and schools and colleges in Kathmandu Valley are in a fix after the government issued a circular advising the public to avoid crowds and strictly observe health and safety protocols for Covid-19.

It's not just students, members of the general public, mostly in Kathmandu Valley, have also been complaining of headache, cough, eye irritation, and throat infection due to air pollution.

Sanjay Sharma, a secretary at the Ministry of Education, on Monday said the government decided to close schools because of the adverse effects the rising air pollution can have on students' health.

Suprabhat Bhandari, chairperson of the Guardians Federation Nepal also criticised the government for the delay in its decision to shut schools.

"The government was well informed about the hazardous situation on Friday, but why didn't it take the decision to close schools then?" said Bhandari. He also accused the central government of breaking the protocol and adopting a blanket approach.

"Now we are in a federal setup. Schools across the country reopened in January based on directives from the local government. This time also, they should have been authorised to decide based on local conditions," said Bhandari.

Meanwhile, school associations are also not happy that the government didn't consult them before deciding to shut schools. "It didn't consult with us and decided unilaterally," said Tikaram Puri, president of Private and Boarding Schools' Organisation Nepal (PABSON), an organisation that has over 6,500 schools members all across the country.

"We only learnt about the government's decision from the media," said Puri.

Some local governments outside the Valley have opposed the government's decision and published separate notices ordering schools to continue classes. "We do not have air pollution and the situation is normal, so our municipality has asked all schools and colleges to continue their classes," Saradha Khanal, deputy-mayor of Bhimad Municipality, Tanahun.

Other municipalities such as Ilam Municipality and Biratnagar Municipality have also issued notices to schools and colleges to conduct classes as normal.



Nepal Health Conclave 2021

TUESDAY, 06th APRIL, 2021

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OPINION

EDITORIAL

Mass murder in Myanmar

South Asian countries that swear by democracy need to speak up.

It was a gloomy weekend in Myanmar as the military junta went on a rampage, killing civilians indiscriminately, conducting air raids and even opening fire on mourners gathered for the funeral of a slain civilian. Cellphone and CCTV video footages show soldiers firing recklessly at citizens minding their own business. Chilling narratives of children and elderly alike being picked up by the military, only to be returned as corpses the next day, are coming out on social media. The military junta has not been tamed at all nearly a decade after Myanmar adopted the democratic process.

While there is considerable global outrage against the criminal suppression of democratic rights in Myanmar; global powers have done precious little to restrain the military and help stop the massacre. As *Reuters* reported, the UN Special Rapporteur for Myanmar said the junta was carrying out 'mass murder', and called on the world to isolate the military and halt its access to weapons. UN Secretary-General António Guterres on Sunday expressed shock at the killing of the civilians, and called for a 'firm, unified & resolute international response'.

That the 'mass murder' is being organised in the neighbourhood should be of concern for South Asian countries that swear by democracy. In fact, most South Asian countries have been a disappointment when it comes to putting the Myanmar junta in the dock vis-à-vis the desecration of democracy there. On Saturday, the bloodiest day in the country after the military took over, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan sent representatives to attend the Myanmar Armed Forces Day military parade in Naypyitaw even as the military reportedly killed 114 innocent civilians.

Nepal has failed to even speak a word ever since the government issued a half-hearted press statement on February 1, the day the military took over. Being a responsible member of the South Asian neighbourhood, Nepal has much more to do in terms of holding the Myanmar military junta accountable for grave acts of human rights violation. In fact, Nepal has previously abstained from voting on the UN resolution on the violation of the human rights of Rohingya Muslims by the Myanmar government and military. Above all, it is incumbent upon Nepal, as a UN Human Rights Council member, to defend the Myanmar civilians' rights to life, freedom and dignity.

Today, representatives of the same government that oppressed the minorities have been put under arrest by the military. Myanmar's democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi has been a disappointment for her inability to protect the rights of the people in the past several years after she came to power. But that does not mean Suu Kyi and other democratic leaders should be left to fend for themselves when they are becoming victims of the military's high-handedness.

The Myanmar people have shown immense grit in the face of a brutal military crackdown even as over 400 of them have lost their lives while over 2,000 have been arrested and many others maimed. The Myanmar people deserve utmost support of pro-democracy forces all over the world. The rights of the Myanmar people to fight for democracy and peace must be protected, and the global community should come out strongly against the Myanmar junta's criminal oppression and massacre of the people.

Pitfalls of overregulation in banking

A regulatory regime is essential only if the system moves beyond the obsession of collateralised lending.

ACHYUT WAGLE



Even the most ardent advocates of free market capitalism have concurred that regulation of the financial system, particularly of the banks, is indispensable. The two most prominent rationales for such regulation are to prevent the banks from potential moral hazards in lending the depositors' money to risky projects for quick profits, and to maintain the overall stability of the fanatical system of the economy concerned.

The global financial crisis of 2008-09, triggered by American subprime lending, reinforced the idea of stricter regulation of the financial sector so as to avoid similar catastrophes in future. A comprehensive study in 164 countries by the World Bank entitled 'Bank Regulation and Supervision Ten Years after the Global Financial Crisis' concludes, 'bank supervision became stricter and more complex compared with the pre-global financial crisis period.'

Despite criticism, a few key neoliberal concepts on financial governance like the central bank independence and its obligation to focus on the core function of inflation targeting 'theorised' through discourses like Augmented Washington Consensus have not only survived but, generally, consolidated. However, the risk-weighted capital (adequacy) regulation has rather obsessively preoccupied the regulators. In parallel, the self-regulatory regimes designed for the bank and financial institutions primarily in compliance with the Basel III regulatory framework have come into practice, albeit to a varied extent in different countries. The overarching objectives of these developments are rooted in the principle of 'minimal government' where the regulator and each individual bank became robustly professional and efficient. Only then can the financial sector effectively contribute to the economy by investing in entrepreneurial and value chain ecosystems.

Compromise and arbitrage

If viewed through the lenses of global best practices, Nepal's financial system suffers from a paradox of overregulation on the one hand and, on the other, massive regulatory arbitrage by the industry players. Every successive leadership in Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB), despite its very powerful NRB Act (2002), has failed to assert its deserved independence. The powerful political shadow of the government of



POST FILE PHOTO

the hour has persistently cast on it not only during key appointments of governors and deputy governors but also in day-to-day administration. The preference of the personal loyalty of the candidates to powerful rulers over the academic and professional qualifications, as manifested in the recent appointment of two deputy governors of the Bank, is gradually rendering the central monetary authority a toothless entity. Therefore, the compendium of NRB directives is burgeoning but effectiveness is not.

The central bank has miserably failed to timely update its outlook towards the financial industry and introduce risk-mitigating instruments. Even in this era of information technology, physical presence and paper verification of the customers is ever increasing. No substantive borrowing is possible without pledging immovable property as collateral. Although the Risk Management Guidelines of NRB states the banks would 'analyse of borrower's repayment history as well as current and future capacity to repay, based on historical financial trends and future cash flow projections. For commercial credits, the borrower's business expertise and the condition of the borrower's economic sector and its position within that sector' needed to be reviewed.

But, all these parameters are essentially meaningless as only the value of the property with an arbitrary haircut is factored in while evaluating the creditworthiness or calculating the limit of the loans. The blacklisting provisions are applicable to only a few voiceless borrowers while about 500 large busi-

ness houses never feature in the list even when their defaults amount to millions. The combined effect of such a laidback approach of the key regulator and volumes of regulations of very vague nature without the real prospect of implementation, in fact, have provided a wide room for regulatory arbitrage to the players in the banking sector.

For example, what is the extent banks can intrude into the private information of a customer; particularly the borrower? It is not specifically clear in any NRB guidelines. The unified directive says, 'information about customers is often confidential, in that it is provided under the terms of a legal agreement or counterparty relationship.' But this has not stopped the banks from asking very personal financial details of bank accounts and employment agreements, beyond legally valid tax return certificates, of the family members who are not necessarily responsible for the repayment of personal type loans. It is clear that banks have found it easier to securitize the loans in this easy fashion of bullying than dwelling on financial and credit history analyses of the client.

Constricted entrepreneurship

The apparent causal effect of overregulation, as if designed to facilitate only to the landlords of the feudal era, is evident in the historically low level of entrepreneurship. It is due to the extremely low level of access to bank credit. It is evidenced by the NRB data itself that the total number of deposit accounts has crossed 31 million while

the total number of loan accounts is barely 1.5 million. Young innovative minds with entrepreneurial intentions and, often, with relevant academic degrees have become the primary victim of the conservative regulatory regime that constricts people who do not own the immovable property (on top of this requirement, banks only accept property with access to a motorable road) from accessing loans directly from banks.

A large number of women with business acumen, who for various reasons of deprivation do not own any immovable property, are also deprived of the opportunity. The symbolism of small-ticket 'collateral free' or 'targeted loans' has very little or no impact on economic output. These are the reasons Nepal's import dependency is horrifically increasing on every passing day, productivity is declining and potential young entrepreneurs are leaving the country in hordes.

As a matter of fact, a regulatory regime is essential only if the banking system moves beyond the obsession of fully collateralised lending where creditworthiness and project-worthiness become the major basis for investment. Then, the regulators and market players will also be forced to leave behind the 'logistic management' and embark on the domain of statistical and technical risk analyses of the entire financial system and, individually, of their own. Nothing should have stopped the NRB to depart from this conservative mindset and to devise appropriate formulae and risk-hedging instruments that address the emerging market needs.

The return of German politics

It has become difficult for Germans to imagine a government led by anyone other than Angela Merkel.

JOSCHKA FISCHER



Angela Merkel's 16-year reign as German chancellor is coming to an end. Whatever one's feelings about her, she has put her stamp on an entire era. But political epochs rarely end quietly, and 'Mutti's' long goodbye is no exception.

German electoral politics have finally started to heat up. The first two state elections of what will be a super election year pointed to the possibility that the federal election on September 26 could produce a new government coalition without Merkel's Christian Democratic Union and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union.

In both Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate, large losses for the CDU coincided with equally strong gains for the Greens and a stable share of the vote for the Free Democrats (FDP). Hence, there is now talk of a possible 'traffic light' coalition between the Social Democrats (red), the FDP (yellow), and the Greens. Suddenly, a change of government in Berlin seems like a realistic possibility.

Moreover, criticism of the Merkel government's management of the pandemic—including a staggering amount of corruption in the procurement of masks—has grown increasingly loud. And for now, the power vacuum at the top of the CDU/CSU remains unfilled. The CDU's rather unconvincing leader, Armin Laschet, is facing off against the CSU's more



SHUTTERSTOCK

charismatic Markus Söder.

Whoever prevails, the CDU/CSU faces an uphill battle, especially following the resounding defeats in two states where the CDU has for decades presided over a quasi-hereditary fiefdom. Those losses, and the steady rise of the Greens, augur a potential disaster for the CDU/CSU. With every passing day, Germans are coming to the difficult realisation that Merkel's chancellorship is indeed ending. Her departure will be all the more painful given the power vacuum within the conservative camp.

The Merkel era largely coincided

with the heyday of globalisation—that is, with the opening of China's massive export market. Domestically, however, it was characterised by resistance to reform, and will be remembered more as a time of talk than of political dynamism. Numerous working groups, stacked with the usual commendable experts, were established to discuss topics like digitisation. But nothing ever really came of it all.

Consider climate and energy policy. Although Germany abandoned nuclear energy after the 2011 Fukushima disaster in Japan, Merkel had reversed

a decision to phase out nuclear power just weeks before. Though the decision was nonetheless courageous, she had to perform something of a 'double U-turn' to help her party in Baden-Württemberg's state elections. But the manoeuvre failed. Since 2011, Baden-Württemberg—a core German industrial region—has been governed by a Green minister-president (Winfried Kretschmann).

Even more courageous was Merkel's 2015 decision to open Germany's doors to refugees fleeing violence in Syria and other parts of the Middle East. But these achievements were excep-

tions that proved the rule. The Merkel era was primarily characterised by quietude, a feature that German voters, having re-elected her three times, obviously appreciated. With the economic sun seemingly always shining on her, why take the risk of reform or strategic audacity?

After such a long period of complacency, it is no surprise that the country is now facing massive structural challenges. Along with the European Commission and other EU member states, the German government will have to work hard to overcome the loss of confidence following Europe's

botched Covid-19 vaccine rollout. The pandemic fallout will have to be high on the agenda regardless of who forms the next government.

While the pandemic has accelerated digitisation, this momentum must now be used to help Europe catch up to the United States and China. Success here and on digital innovation more generally would be a decisive contribution to Europe's sovereignty, helping the German and European economies remain competitive in the twenty-first century. This will require huge investments in research and development, as well as the modernisation of education systems. Fortunately, the EU's 750 billion (\$884 billion) recovery plan, Next Generation EU, offers a historic opportunity to advance all of these objectives.

The greatest challenge, however, lies in 'greening' the economy while also safeguarding workers and preserving social cohesion. Here, the task is too large to manage at the national level. It will have to be done collectively, at the European level, through a European Union that has developed into a global power in its own right.

Thankfully, Donald Trump has left the White House (for good, one hopes), and Europeans recognise that a well-functioning transatlantic alliance will be crucial for protecting their interests in this century. But to strengthen that relationship, Europe will have to share more of the security and political burden and do its part to address the challenges introduced by China's rise.

Neither task will be easy for Germany. But the Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate elections have driven home the fact that Merkel's era of lofty talk and no action is over. Reality is knocking hard on Germany's door, and later this year new caretakers may finally open it.

Fischer, Germany's foreign minister and vice chancellor from 1998 to 2005, was a leader of the German Green Party for almost 20 years.

—Project Syndicate

Second-hand vehicle market booms amid calls for social distancing

Sales of reconditioned autos have increased by 25 to 30 percent compared to pre-pandemic times, dealers say.

KRISHANA PRASAIN
KATHMANDU, MARCH 29

Public transportation has always been stressful for Agya Timsina who commutes daily between Gokarna and Baneshwor by crowded bus and micro.

After the lockdown was lifted, Timsina was told she would have to attend office; and she dreaded having to go back to riding the same crowded buses again.

"I have always thought of buying a scooter. But after the pandemic, I felt it had become a necessity," Timsina, who works for an education consultancy, told the Post.

"I became afraid of commuting by public transportation listening to the news of infections and deaths; and health experts were telling people to maintain physical distance to control the spread of the virus," said the 29-year-old office-goer. "Then I decided to learn to ride a scooter and buy one," she added. After going to driving school for a month, she went to buy a new scooter. But most of the models cost more than Rs200,000 which was beyond her budget. Then one of her friends suggested buying a used scooter, and she thought she should check it out.

Timsina purchased a second-hand scooter for Rs90,000 from a recondition house last November. "I had many doubts about buying a second-hand scooter. I especially worried that it may break down frequently. But it is not giving me much trouble, and I take it in for a service on time," said Timsina who has applied for a driving licence.

Demand for reconditioned vehicles, especially second-hand scooters, has risen sharply, say used car dealers.

"Sales of second-hand scooters have increased by almost 50 percent since the lockdown was lifted," said Rajendra Shahi, owner of Newa Brothers' Recondition House, Ravibhawan.

"Scooters get sold out as soon as they arrive at the shop," Shahi, who has been selling used vehicles for around 18 years, told the Post. "Second-hand scooters costing Rs80,000 to Rs90,000 sell the fastest," he said.

According to him, the price of old scooters depends on the condition and lot number. "I could sell 15-20 second-hand scooters daily if I had enough inventory, but there are more buyers than sellers."



Freedom from crowded public transportation, ease of driving and economics are the main reasons second-hand vehicles have become popular, according to dealers.

There are around 50 recondition houses on the stretch between Soalteemod and Kalanki Mandir which is considered to be a hub for used cars. Shahi said that all the dealers here report a hike in sales.

"With people not being able to buy new cars and the government's apathetic policy towards the automobile sector, prospective customers are turning to reconditioned vehicles, especially after the pandemic," Subhash Acharya, vice-president of the Nepal Automobile Dealers Association, told the Post.

"Sales of reconditioned automobiles have increased by 25 to 30 percent compared to pre-pandemic times," he said. "As most motor vehicles are imported from India and production has slowed there due to the lockdown, the demand and supply gap is also pushing customers towards second-hand machines," he added.

"Freedom from crowded public transportation, ease of driving and

economics are the main reasons second-hand scooters have become popular," Shahi said. "Sales of used motorcycles are at the same level as before the pandemic."

Bhupendra Bhandari, marketing manager of DN Automobiles, Baphal had expected sales of second-hand cars to drop because people had lost their incomes due to the pandemic. But he was in for a pleasant surprise as people driving motorcycles upgraded to four-wheelers.

"Sales of cars priced below Rs1.5 million took off soon after the stay-home order was lifted. We had nearly 30 reconditioned passenger cars in stock which were sold out immediately after the three-month-long lockdown ended," Bhandari said. According to him, demand has dipped slightly of late, but sales are still good.

"There are fewer sellers, but there has been no decline in the number of prospective buyers," said Bhandari of DN Automobile which has completed 10 years of operation.

"People who had not planned to buy a motor vehicle may change their minds as there are chances of a second wave of Covid-19," he said.

According to him, 70 percent of the car owners who sell their vehicles do so to upgrade to a new one while 15 percent do so because they need the cash. Four-wheelers which have been driven for less than five years are in good condition while cars used for more than 10 years might need maintenance.

"Around 16 people come to us to sell their four-wheelers daily. Our sales average 22 cars monthly," he said.

"There should be laws regulating sales of reconditioned automobiles as there are high chances of stolen cars being put on the market," Acharya said.

"If there was financing facilities for second-hand automobiles, more people would have access to them. Due to the high demand for reconditioned vehicles, prices have also increased in recent times."

Traffic in Suez Canal resumes after stranded ship refloated

REUTERS
ISMAILIA (EGYPT), MARCH 29

Shipping traffic through Egypt's Suez Canal resumed on Monday after a giant container ship which had been blocking the busy waterway for almost a week was refloated, the canal authority said.

The 400-metre (430-yard) long Ever Given became jammed diagonally across a southern section of the canal in high winds early last Tuesday, halting traffic on the shortest shipping route between Europe and Asia.

Live footage on a local television station showed the ship surrounded by tug boats moving slowly in the centre of the canal. The station, ExtraNews, said the ship was moving at a speed of 1.5 knots.

"Admiral Osama Rabie, the Chairman of the Suez Canal Authority (SCA), announces the resumption of maritime traffic in the Suez Canal after the Authority successfully rescues and floats the giant Panamanian container ship EVER GIVEN," a statement from the SCA said.

"She's free," an official involved in the salvage operation said.

After dredging and excavation work over the weekend, rescue workers from the SCA and a team from Dutch firm Smit Salvage had succeeded in partially refloating the ship earlier on Monday using tug boats, two marine and shipping sources said.

Evergreen Line, which is leasing the Ever Given, confirmed the ship had been successfully refloated and said it would be repositioned and inspected for seaworthiness.

At least 369 vessels are waiting to

transit the canal, including dozens of container ships, bulk carriers, oil tankers and liquefied natural gas (LNG) or liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) vessels, the SCA's Rabie said.

The authority said earlier it would be able to accelerate convoys through the canal once the Ever Given was freed. "We will not waste one second," Rabie told Egyptian state television.

He said it could take from two-and-a-half to three days to clear the backlog, and a canal source said more than 100 ships would be able to enter the channel daily. Shipping group Maersk said the knock-on disruptions to global shipping could take weeks or months to unravel.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who had not publicly commented on the blockage, said Egypt had ended the crisis and assured resumption of trade through the canal. Oil prices were about one percent lower at \$63.95 a barrel. Shares of Taiwan-listed Evergreen Marine Corp—the vessel's lessor—rose 1.75 percent.

About 15 percent of world shipping traffic transits the Suez Canal, which is an important source of foreign currency revenue for Egypt. The stoppage is costing the canal \$14-\$15 million a day. Shipping rates for oil product tankers nearly doubled after the ship became stranded, and the blockage has disrupted global supply chains, threatening costly delays for companies already dealing with Covid-19 restrictions.

Maersk was among shippers rerouting cargoes around the Cape of Good Hope, adding up to two weeks to journeys and extra fuel costs.



Ship Ever Given, one of the world's largest container ships, is seen after it was fully floated in Suez Canal, Egypt on Monday.

FOREX

US Dollar	116.32
Euro	136.93
Pound Sterling	160.84
Japanese Yen	10.62
Chinese Yuan	17.73
Qatari Riyal	31.95
Australian Dollar	88.97
Malaysian Ringgit	28.09
Saudi Arab Riyal	31.02

Exchange rates fixed by Nepal Rastra Bank

Shares

Nepse					
2,543,524.45					
-0.21%					
HIGHEST LOSERS					
CGH	MHNL	STC	KPCL	NMBSO	CHL
-7.17%	-6.67%	-4.87%	-4.28%	-3.97%	-3.83%
MODERATE LOSERS					
LFL	NCCB	SSHL	PIC	GLH	NRN
-3.27%	-3.08%	-2.87%	-2.72%	-2.31%	-2.29%
MODERATE GAINERS					
UMHL	GUFL	LLBS	HURLA	UMRH	WOM
4.73%	4.83%	5.41%	5.45%	5.63%	5.96%
HIGHEST GAINERS					
SNLB	RHPC	SMFDB	MLBSL	AIL	USLB
6.99%	7.18%	9.43%	9.85%	9.92%	10%

BULLION

PRICE PER TOLA	
Fine Gold	Rs 86,500
Silver	Rs 1,225

SOURCE: FENEGOSIDA

GASOLINE WATCH

SERVO 4T
ENGINE OILS
100% PERFORMANCE. EVERYTIME.

Petrol (Per Litre)	Rs 118.00/-
Diesel (Per Litre)	Rs 101.00/-
Kerosene (Per Litre)	Rs 101.00/-
LPG (Per cylinder)	Rs 1400/-

Source: Nepal Oil Corporation

Fridges, microwaves fall prey to global chip shortage

REUTERS
SHANGHAI, MARCH 29

A global shortage of chips that has rattled production lines at car companies and squeezed stockpiles at gadget makers, is now leaving home appliance makers unable to meet demand, according to the president of Whirlpool Corp in China.

The US based company, one of the world's largest white goods firm, is falling behind on exports to Europe and the United States from China, by as much as 25 percent on some months, Jason Ai told Reuters in Shanghai.

"It's a perfect storm," he said on the sidelines of the Appliance and World Electronics Expo.

"On the one hand we have to satisfy domestic demand for appliances, on the other hand we're facing an explosion of export orders. As far as chips go, for those of us in China, it was inevitable."

The company has struggled to secure enough microcontrollers, simple processors that power over half of its products including microwaves, refrigerators, and washing machines.

While the chip shortage has affected a range of high-end suppliers like Qualcomm Inc, it originated and remains most severe for mature technologies, for example power-management chips used in cars.

The chip shortage, which began in



A Whirlpool French Door refrigerator is shown during a trade show in Las Vegas.

earnest in late December, was caused in part as automakers miscalculated demand and pandemic-fuelled sales of smartphones and laptops surged. It forced carmakers including General Motors to cut production, and increased costs for smartphone makers such as Xiaomi Corp.

And with every company that uses chips in its products panic buying to shore up its stockpile, the shortage

has blindsided not just Whirlpool but other appliance makers too. Hangzhou Robam Appliances Co Ltd, a Chinese white goods maker with over 26,000 employees, had to delay the release of a new high-end stove vent by four months because it couldn't source enough microcontrollers.

"Most of our products are already optimised for smart home use, so of course we need a lot of chips," said

Dan Ye, marketing director at Robam. He added that the company had found it easier to source chips from China than overseas, prompting it to re-evaluate future supplies.

"The chips we use in our products aren't the most cutting edge. Domestic chips can satisfy our needs completely."

Already cutthroat, profit margins at white goods firms are getting further squeezed due to the shortage.

Robin Rao, planning department director of China's Sichuan Changhong Electric Co Ltd, said lengthy replacement cycles for appliances, coupled with intense competition and a slowing real estate market, have long kept profit margins thin.

"But because of these core components and chips, our supply chain capital costs have increased."

To deal with the shortage of microprocessors and flash memory chips, Dreame Technology—a vacuum cleaner brand funded by Xiaomi—cut its marketing budget and hired extra staff just to manage relationships with suppliers.

Dreame has also spent "several million yuan" to test out chips that could serve as alternatives to the ones it typically uses, said Frank Wang, the company's marketing director.

"We're working to have deeper control of our suppliers, and have even invested in a few suppliers," he said.

Facebook, Google plan new undersea cables to connect Southeast Asia and America

REUTERS
SINGAPORE, MARCH 29

Facebook said on Monday it planned two new undersea cables to connect Singapore, Indonesia and North America in a project with Google and regional telecommunication companies to boost internet connection capacity between the regions.

"Named Echo and Bifrost, those will be the first two cables to go through a new diverse route crossing the Java Sea and they will increase overall subsea capacity in the trans-pacific by about 70 percent," Facebook Vice President of Network Investments, Kevin Salvadori, told Reuters.

The cables, according to the executive, will be the first to directly connect North America to some of the main parts of Indonesia, and will increase connectivity for the central and eastern provinces of the world's fourth most populous country.

Too quiet for comfort: Spanish town worries about tourist season

REUTERS
MAGALUF (SPAIN), MARCH 29

Quiet and birdsong have replaced the sounds of thumping music and fun-loving tourists in the popular Mallorca resort of Magaluf, and the prospect of another potentially lost season is weighing heavily on locals.

Along the deserted main drag, bars that usually throng with mainly British tourists to the Spanish island are shuttered. Some have put up hand-made paper signs saying "we love tourists" and "we will be back in 2021".

"It's very strange, it's like a ghost city," said a 35-year-old Italian tourist from Florence, who gave only her first name, Virginia. She and her friend Helena were among the few tourists to make it to Magaluf for a spring holiday as much of Europe grapples to get coronavirus under control.

"We just have to wait for better times and meanwhile we enjoy the peace," said Helena, 29, a designer from Milan.

But for locals, peace and quiet doesn't pay the bills.

"The truth is we're all a bit sad ... All this is a bit of a mess," Maria Asun, 59, who has lived in Magaluf for 40 years and run La Vila ice-cream parlour for seven, told Reuters.

A smattering of locals sit outside the ice-cream parlour wearing masks. For sale signs dot holiday apartment balconies. At a time of year when the town should be busy with spring tourists and gearing up for the summer crush, there is uncertainty over what tourism will take place this year.

Britain currently bans all foreign travel, except for work, education or health reasons. The government is to review that in April and possibly allow it from May 17.

"Magaluf relies heavily on British tourism so it goes without saying it's been heavily affected," Nikki Boskett, who has run the Gemini hair salon in the town centre for five years, told Reuters. "It's been quieter for sure, many businesses are far more hesitant about opening."

The eerie silence that hangs over Magaluf highlights just how hard the pandemic has hit the country's tourism sector.

Foreign tourism to Spain plunged 80 percent last year to 19 million visitors—its lowest in half a century—as global pandemic restrictions dramatically curtailed international travel.

"Right now we're usually focusing on opening up, all the hotels are preparing for Easter, all the bars are open and lots of people are working around here," said Maria Asun.

"Now, you go out onto the street ... and there is no one."



People wait in queue outside a coronavirus disease test site at Son Sant Joan airport in Palma de Mallorca, Spain.

WORLD

BRIEFING

Taiwan reports large incursion by Chinese air force

TAIPEI: Ten Chinese military aircraft including fighter jets entered the southwestern corner of Taiwan's air defence identification zone on Monday, the island's defence ministry said, in a further escalation of tension across the sensitive Taiwan Strait. Taiwan's air force deployed missiles to "monitor" the incursion, the island's defence ministry said, without elaborating. It also said its planes warned the Chinese aircraft over the radio.

Newlywed militant suspects blamed in Indonesia attack

INDONESIA: A recently married couple with suspected militant links used pressure cooker bombs to blow themselves up outside a Roman Catholic cathedral during Palm Sunday Mass, Indonesian officials said on Monday. The attack wounded 20 people, including four church guards, and broke windows at the church and nearby buildings in Makassar, the capital of South Sulawesi province. The couple were married six months ago and police were investigating their home in Makassar, National Police spokesperson Argo Yuwono said. The attackers detonated their bombs when they were confronted by guards outside the church.

Beijing launches air pollution crackdown after sandstorms engulf city

BEIJING: China's capital Beijing has launched a month-long campaign to stamp out air pollution violations, the official Xinhua news agency reported on Monday, after the city was choked by two sandstorms in as many weeks. Beijing's air quality index (AQI) reached the maximum 500 on Sunday, as dust carrying extremely high levels of hazardous particles blew in from Mongolia and northwest China. In mid-March, the city was hit by what China's weather bureau called the biggest sandstorm in a decade. Although external factors were blamed for the conditions, the Beijing authorities will carry out inspections on all local construction sites until the end of April, severely cracking down on violations such as allowing construction dust to get out and unpunctual clearance of waste, Xinhua said.

(AGENCIES)

Thousands take to the streets as five more protesters killed in Myanmar

About 3,000 ethnic Karen people have fled to Thailand after military jets bomb their villages.

REUTERS
MYANMAR, MARCH 29

Myanmar security forces killed at least five protesters on Monday, three of them in the main city of Yangon, witnesses and media reported, as activists called on ethnic minority forces in the diverse nation to back their campaign against military rule.

After the bloodiest day since the February 1 military coup with 114 deaths on Saturday, thousands took to the streets in towns across the country, determined to show their opposition to the relapse into military rule after a decade of democratic reform.

At least two people were killed in the Yangon district of South Dagon when security forces moved in to clear protesters' barricades, residents said. "We can confirm two were killed in our ward," said one neighbourhood resident who asked to be identified as just Win.

Security forces fired a much heavier-calibre weapon than usual to clear a barricade in South Dagon, witnesses said and a video clip showed. It was not immediately clear what type, although a community group posted a picture of a soldier with a grenade launcher.

State television said security forces used "riot weapons" to disperse a crowd of "violent terrorist people" who were destroying a pavement and one man was wounded.

One man was killed earlier in another Yangon neighbourhood, when security forces fired on protesters and a Red Cross team, witness Thiha Soe told Reuters.

Police and a junta spokesman did not answer calls seeking comment. Myanmar's Red Cross said in a message it was checking the report.

Two people were also killed in shooting in the central town of Myingyan, student leader Moe Myint Hein told Reuters.

Based on a tally by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners advocacy group, 464 civilians have been killed since the coup.

Despite the violence, crowds turned out in towns across the country, according to media and social media posts.

One of the main groups behind the



Protesters use slingshots while taking cover behind a barricade as smoke rises from burning debris during ongoing protests against the military coup, in Monywa, Sagaing region, Myanmar on Monday.

protests, the General Strike Committee of Nationalities, called in an open letter on Facebook for ethnic minority forces to help those standing up to the "unfair oppression" of the military.

"It is necessary for the ethnic armed organisations to collectively protect the people," the group said.

Insurgents from different ethnic groups have battled the central government for decades for greater autonomy. Though many groups have agreed to ceasefires, fighting has flared in recent days between the army and forces in both the east and north.

Heavy clashes erupted on the weekend near the Thai border between the army and fighters from Myanmar's oldest ethnic minority force, the Karen National Union (KNU).

About 3,000 villagers fled to Thailand when military jets bombed a KNU area after a KNU force overran an army outpost and killed 10 people, an activist group and media said.

The Free Burma Rangers activist group said 2,009 people had been

forced to return to the Myanmar side of the border on Monday evening.

"Thailand's heartless and illegal act must stop now," Sunai Phasuk, senior researcher on Thailand for Human Rights Watch, wrote on Twitter.

A Thai provincial official said the refugees had not been pushed back but were on the Thai side of a border river.

Earlier, Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha said he wanted Myanmar's latest problems to remain there.

"We don't want to have an exodus, evacuation into our territory but we will observe human rights," Prayuth told reporters in Bangkok.

He also dismissed suggestions Thailand was backing the Myanmar junta.

In Myanmar's north, fighting erupted on Sunday in the jade-mining area of Hpakant when Kachin Independence Army (KIA) fighters attacked a police station, Kachinwaves media reported.

Both the KNU and KIA have

expressed support for the anti-coup movement and called on the army to stop the violence against civilian protesters.

Myanmar's military has for decades justified its grip on power by saying it is the only institution capable of preserving national unity. It seized power saying that November elections won by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's party were fraudulent, an assertion dismissed by the election commission.

Suu Kyi remains in detention at an undisclosed location and many other figures in her party are also in custody.

UN Special Rapporteur for Myanmar Tom Andrews said the army was carrying out "mass murder" and called on the world to isolate the junta. US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said the United States was suspending all trade engagement with Myanmar until the return of a democratically elected government.

But foreign criticism and Western sanctions have failed to sway the generals.

Russian opposition activist says police detained his father to pressure him

REUTERS
MOSCOW, MARCH 29

A close ally of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny accused authorities on Monday of detaining his father over the weekend in an attempt to pressure him over his opposition activities which include organising a new anti-government protest.

Ivan Zhdanov, head of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, said that police had detained his retired father in the southern city of Rostov-on-Don for alleged abuse of office after searching his home and questioning him into the night.

"I have no doubts that this criminal case is linked to me and to what I do," said Zhdanov, who is outside Russia and part of a team of anti-Kremlin activists trying to mobilise support for a new protest this spring which the authorities oppose.

Police in Rostov did not immediately respond to a request for comment about the case.

Zhdanov said his father had various health problems and that he doubted the 66-year-old would be able to survive being held in pre-trial detention.

Authorities have cracked down on allies of Navalny, President Vladimir Putin's most prominent critic, whose jailing on what he said were trumped up parole violation charges sparked protests earlier this year.

The authorities accuse his allies of illegally encouraging people to take part in those protests which they said at the time were not authorised and represented a public health risk due to Covid-19.

They have cast Navalny as a Western-backed puppet on a mission to destabilise Russia ahead of a parliamentary election due in September, a charge he denies.

Many of Navalny's closest allies, including his spokeswoman and brother, are under house arrest and facing charges.

Zhdanov's father used to work as an official in a village in Russia's northern Nenets region, but has been retired since last summer, Zhdanov said on Facebook.

The case against him relates to him recommending social housing be allocated to a woman whose family had already received a housing subsidy.

Animals likely source of Covid-19 outbreak: WHO

ASSOCIATED PRESS
BEIJING, MARCH 29

A joint WHO-China study on the origins of Covid-19 says that transmission of the virus from bats to humans through another animal is the most likely scenario and that a lab leak is "extremely unlikely," according to a draft copy obtained by The Associated Press.

The findings offer little new insight into how the virus first emerged and leave many questions unanswered, though that was as expected. But the report does provide more detail on the reasoning behind the researchers' conclusions. The team proposed further research in every area except the lab leak hypothesis.

The report, which is expected to be made public Tuesday, is being closely watched since discovering the origins of the virus could help scientists prevent future pandemics—but it's also extremely sensitive since China bristles at any suggestion that it is to blame for the current one. Repeated delays in the report's release have raised questions about whether the Chinese side was trying to skew its conclusions.

"We've got real concerns about the methodology and the process that went into that report, including the fact that the government in Beijing apparently helped to write it," U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a recent CNN interview. China rejected that criticism Monday.

"The U.S. has been speaking out on the report. By doing this, isn't the U.S. trying to exert political pressure on the members of the WHO expert group?" asked Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian.

The report is based largely on a

India suffers highest daily coronavirus infections in five months

NEW DELHI: India reported the highest daily increase in coronavirus cases in five months on Monday, with the second wave of the disease driven by surging infections in the country's richest state Maharashtra.

A total of 68,020 new coronavirus cases were reported in the last 24 hours, the health ministry said. It was the highest daily rise since October 11, according to a Reuters tally.

India has been reporting a spike in cases—above the 60,000 mark—for three consecutive days, though Monday's rise was still below September's peak of more than 90,000 cases a day.

The total number of cases since the epidemic began a year ago crossed the 12 million mark, making India the hardest hit country outside the United States and Brazil.

visit by a WHO team of international experts to Wuhan, the Chinese city where Covid-19 was first detected, from mid-January to mid-February.

In the draft obtained by the AP, the researchers listed four scenarios in order of likelihood for the emergence of the coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2. Topping the list was transmission from bats through another animal, which they said was likely to very likely. They evaluated direct spread from bats to humans as likely, and said that spread through "cold-chain" food products was possible but not likely.



People wearing face masks to help protect against the spread of coronavirus enjoy blooming cherry blossoms from paddle boats in Tokyo on Monday.

AP/RSS

China warns firms not to engage in politics over Xinjiang

REUTERS
BEIJING, MARCH 29

Chinese officials on Monday said Sweden's H&M and other foreign companies should not make rash moves or step into politics after the companies raised concerns about forced labour in Xinjiang, sparking a furious online backlash and boycotts.

H&M, Burberry, Nike, Adidas and other Western brands have been hit by consumer boycotts in China since last week over comments about their sourcing of cotton in Xinjiang. The growing rift comes as the United States and other Western governments increase pressure on China over suspected human rights abuses in the region.

"I don't think a company should politicize its economic behaviour," said Xu Guixiang, a Xinjiang government spokesman, at a news conference on Monday morning. "Can H&M continue to make money in the Chinese market? Not anymore."

The US has publicly accused Beijing of genocide against the Uighur Muslim ethnic minorities.

"To rush into this decision and get involved in the sanctions is not reasonable. It's like lifting a stone to drop it on one's own feet," he said.

H&M did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Chinese social media users last week began circulating a 2020 statement by H&M announcing it would no longer source cotton from Xinjiang.

H&M said at the time the decision was due to difficulties conducting credible due diligence in the region and after media and human rights groups reported the use of forced

labour in Xinjiang - a charge that Beijing has repeatedly denied.

Elijan Anayat, another Xinjiang government spokesman, said during the briefing that Chinese people did not want the products of companies such as H&M and Nike that have boycotted Xinjiang's cotton. He said he would welcome companies taking trips to the region's cotton fields to see them for themselves.

Washington on Friday condemned what it called a state-led social media campaign in China against US and other international companies for committing not to use cotton from Xinjiang.

The wave of consumer boycotts in China has coincided with a coordinated set of sanctions imposed by Britain, Canada, the European Union and the United States last week over what they say are human rights abuses taking place in Xinjiang. The US government has publicly accused Beijing of genocide against the Uighur Muslim ethnic minorities in the region.

Xu repeatedly rejected accusations of genocide and human rights abuses in the region and accused the Western powers of engaging in political manipulation to destabilise China with the sanctions.

"They have lost their minds and their conscience, they are enthusiastic about political manipulation and the abuse of sanctions, to a level that is hysterical," said Xu.

Anayat said: "Their real purpose by fabricating the issue of genocide is to disrupt security and stability in China."

The United States in January announced an import ban on all cotton and tomato products from the area due to allegations of forced labour from detained Uighur Muslims.

Western governments and rights groups have previously accused authorities in the far-western region of detaining and torturing Uighurs in camps, where some former inmates have said they were subject to ideological indoctrination.

Nepal edge Bangladesh to claim Three Nations Cup trophy

The hosts overcome their South Asian rivals 2-1 in the final match at the Dasharath Stadium to claim their fifth international title and second trophy at home ground.



POST PHOTO: ELITE JOSHI

Nepal finally ended their eight-match goalless streak after goals from Sanjog Rai (on air) and Bishal Rai helped them beat Bangladesh in the final of the Three Nations Cup football tournament.

PRAJWAL OLI
KATHMANDU, MARCH 29

Hosts Nepal defeated Bangladesh 2-1 in the final of the Three Nations Cup football tournament at the Dasharath Stadium in Tripureshwar on Monday.

Tournament debutant midfielder Sanjog Rai and Bishal Rai scored in the first half to seal the victory as Nepal claimed the fifth international title and second trophy at home. Mahbubur Rahman pulled one back late in the second half for Bangladesh.

Champions Nepal received the winners' trophy and a cash prize of \$5000 and runners-up Bangladesh got \$3000.

In the group stage match played on Saturday, Nepal had played 0-0 draw against Bangladesh before settling for the same scoreline against the U-23 team of Kyrgyzstan on Thursday.

Nepal's first trophy at home dates back to 1984 when the team defeated the same opponents 4-2 in the first South Asian Federation Games now known as SAG at the Dasharath Stadium. Apart from that Nepal won

gold in the 1993 SAF Games and 2016 Bangabandhu Gold Cup both in Dhaka. In the same year Nepal won the AFC Solidarity Cup in Malaysia.

Nepal made two changes in the starting XI in comparison to the last two matches replacing forward Avishek Rijal with Sunil Bal and bringing central midfielder Bishal Rai in place of Ravi Shankar Paswan.

"As I have told earlier, we came with a different tactics and different formation and that paid off," said coach Bal Gopal Maharjan, who had also led the team to Bangabandhu trophy. Maharjan also made changes in the 4-4-2 formation he played in the last two matches by deploying a single forward Anjan Bista.

"It's a proud moment to win the trophy at home turf. We were defeated by the Bangladesh team at the same venue in the 1999 South Asian Games football final while I was a player," recalled Maharjan, adding that he had defeated Bangladesh most while as a coach and also as a player.

Nepal looked a better side from the onset piling pressure on their opponent. They created nearly half a dozen

goal scoring opportunities in the first half. Bangladesh, meanwhile, barely threatened the goal.

Skipper Kiran Limbu lauded the fighting spirit of his teammates. "There are lots of positive changes in the squad in comparison to the one we played against Bangladesh in November last year. There are many young players and have fighting spirit. But my goal with the team is to win the SAFF Championship."

Nepal created their first real chance in the 13th minute only for midfielder Tridev Gurung to apply a feeble touch from the area on Sunil Bal's cross allowing Bangladesh defender Riyadul Hasan to clear it.

Nepal came closer to scoring in the 17th minute when defender Ananta Tamang was allowed a free header in Sunil Bal's cross forcing Bangladesh goalie Anishu Rahman for a long stretch dive. A minute later Sanjog Rai broke the deadlock with a quick strike as Bangladeshi defenders failed to clear the ball from the crowded area following a corner.

The goal also broke Nepal's eight match long 748-minute goal drought

who had last scored against Chinese Taipei in September 2019 in the World Cup and Asian Cup joint qualifiers match.

During the half hour mark, forward Anjan Bista wasted a golden scoring opportunity when he chipped above the bar from the area in one-on-one with the advancing Bangladesh goalie Rahman.

The home team backed by roaring supporters doubled the advantage in the 42nd minute through Bishal Rai after he fired a powerful shot to beat Bangladesh goalie Rahman in Ranjit Dhimal's pass.

Bangladesh created a couple of chances in the second half and pulled one back in the 83rd minute through substitute Mahububur Rahaman. The unmarked forward made a towering header to convert skipper Jamal Bhuiya's corner. Though Bangladesh pushed on for a second goal, they ran out of time.

Nepal's star defender Rohit Chand was declared the player-of-the-tournament and won \$500 while goal scorer Sanjog Rai was named man-of-the-match and won \$250.

Biraj Maharjan calls time on international football career

PRAJWAL OLI
KATHMANDU, MARCH 29

Biraj Maharjan, the most accomplished captain of the Nepali national football team, pulled the curtains down on his 13-year long glittering international career with his last appearance against Bangladesh in the home team's 2-1 title celebration of Three Nations Cup at the Dasharath Stadium, Tripureshwar on Monday.

The victory made the defender's final appearance in the national colour a moment to celebrate. "What could have been a better farewell to me than winning a trophy at the home soil," said the 31-year old, who will still give continuity to club football.

Maharjan had been struggling to get playing time of late and came as a 90th minute substitute for Tridev Gurung and played in the six minutes stoppage. He also wore the national captain's armband. Once the final whistle was blown, he was carried by his teammates and paraded around the stadium.

He was applauded by roaring home supporters as Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli presented him with a blazer at his farewell.

"It is an emotional day for me and a very tough decision to make. But every player has to go through this day in their career," said Maharjan. "I have never imagined that I would achieve this height when I started the game. I thank my supporters, teammates and coaches."

Captain Kiran Limbu, who succeeded Maharjan, said that the team have fulfilled their promise of a happy farewell. "Having spent 13-years of playing career with him, I had promised him a trophy on his farewell before the tournament began. And we did it," he said.

Maharjan, who debuted for the

national team at 18 against Pakistan in 2008, achieved what none of his predecessors did. He led the national team to three titles in 2016 including the U-23 men's football gold in South Asian Games (SAG) in February, AFC Solidarity Cup in September and Bangabandhu Gold Cup in January. The SAG was an age group event but the other two held in the same year were official international.

With the Bangabandhu cup Nepal had ended their 23-year international trophy drought.

The left back started playing football while he was a child and was selected for the second batch of football academy run by the All Nepal Football Association (ANFA) as a U-12 player. Since then, he never had to look back. He represented Nepal in various age group international tournaments.

After making his debut against Pakistan in an international friendly, he won 73 caps. Maharjan, one of the most prolific left backs the country has ever produced, has scored one international goal against Kyrgyzstan during the AFC Challenge Cup in March 2009.

He wore the captain's armband for the first time during Trivandrum SAFF Championship in December 2015 against India replacing Anil Gurung. He led the team as captain for 18 matches.

Maharjan had been struggling for a regular place in the national fold since 2019. Leaving aside the final of the Three Nations Cup, his last international appearance came at a friendly match against Malaysia in June 2019.

He also claimed top tier domestic league—the Martyrs Memorial 'A' Division League—with Three Star Club, Manang Marshyangdi Club and Machhindra Club. He led Machhindra to the league title in the last season.



POST PHOTO: HEMANTA SHRESTHA

Teammates hoist former Nepal national football team captain and defender Biraj Maharjan after he announced his retirement from international career with 73 caps.

HOROSCOPE

ARIES (March 21-April 19) ***

Two different stories are at play under Tuesday's skies. The psychological Scorpio moon draws you into a private, emotionally rich realm and on the other, gift-giving Venus aligns with disciplined Saturn.

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

As a Taurus, you're faithfully guided by the celestial movements of the bond-building planet, Venus. Tuesday's skies feature a grounding, supportive alignment between Venus and self-disciplined Saturn.

GEMINI (May 21-June 21) ***

There's things to take care of under Tuesday's cosmic landscape, Gemini. Look for the errands on your to-do list that have slipped through the cracks in recent days.

CANCER (June 22-July 22) ****

You're likely to find yourself pining for play over productivity today. Cancer. The moon slithers into depth-probing Scorpio, stirring up your need for romance and creative activities.

LEO (July 23-August 22) **

You're ready to tap out of your social life for a bit, Leo. The moon slides through pensive Scorpio all day, directing your attention towards any buried feelings stirring just below the surface.

VIRGO (August 23-September 22) ****

As a Virgo, you're a natural born storyteller. Let yourself activate this talent today through any kind of activity that allows for open, fearless self-expression.

LIBRA (September 23-October 22) ***

As a Libra, you're cosmically guided by the bond-building planet, Venus. Today's skies see Venus in a well-supported alignment with stable Saturn, helping you ground down and explore realistic opportunities for connection on the romantic front.

SCORPIO (October 23-November 21) ***

The final day of the month has a few curveballs in store, Scorpio. The moon spends the day in your sign, helping you tune back into your health, body, and current emotional state.

SAGITTARIUS (November 22-December 21) ***

You've just about had enough of everyone's demands, Sagittarius. Let yourself become an introverted, self-focused hermit for the day.

CAPRICORN (December 22-January 19) ****

As a Capricorn, you're ruled by the stoic and patient planet, Saturn. Today's skies see Saturn receiving a visit from benefit-bringing Venus, helping to attract positive but subtle opportunities.

AQUARIUS (January 20-February 18) ***

You're ready to get after it today, Aquarius. The moon glides through sharp-focused Scorpio, directing your attention towards your current career path and it's pressing concerns.

PISCES (February 19-March 20) **

It's hard to stay focused on the present tense today, Pisces. Your focus seems to be swept up in future plans, as the deep-diving Scorpio moon has you closely examining your next move.

CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- 1 Casual wear
- 5 Campus figure
- 9 Cattle stall
- 13 Director — Preminger
- 14 Bucks
- 15 Uncivil
- 16 Paddock youngster
- 17 Fully grown
- 18 Fully qualified
- 19 Forgotten
- 21 Muscle spasm
- 22 Show distress
- 23 Place to keep money
- 25 Scruggs of bluegrass
- 27 Earning big bucks (hyph.)
- 31 Like a wedding cake
- 35 Healing succulent
- 36 Nailed obliquely
- 38 Actress — Garbo
- 39 Cribbage card
- 40 Banana oil, e.g.
- 42 Expensive gift
- 43 Tools for duels
- 46 Military cap
- 47 Triangle part
- 48 Autocrat
- 50 Soared
- 52 Brainstorm
- 54 The others
- 55 Decorates a cake
- 58 Pub pint
- 60 House pet
- 64 Crazy, to Pedro
- 65 Pack rat
- 67 Friendly
- 68 Pie crust ingredient
- 69 Revise
- 70 Mme. Gluck of opera
- 71 Swing around
- 72 Delicate blossom
- 73 Marsh grass

DOWN

- 1 Soy product
- 2 School founded in 1440
- 3 ORD guesses
- 4 Like instant cocoa
- 5 Engine housing
- 6 Chase away
- 7 Kukla's friend
- 8 Rich dude (2 wds.)
- 9 Worm for bait
- 10 Bumpkin
- 11 Groundless
- 12 Noise from a pager
- 14 Tycoon
- 20 Short sleep
- 24 Magazine stand
- 26 Fix, as a boxing match
- 27 Diminished
- 28 Wed secretly
- 29 Brain parts
- 30 Impede
- 32 Overhaul
- 33 Debussy music
- 34 Took the music
- 37 Station
- 41 Gere or Egan
- 44 TV serial part
- 45 Grassy square
- 47 Colloquium
- 49 Ad come-on
- 51 Barbie's friend
- 53 Crockett's last stand
- 55 Reformers' targets
- 56 Fossil fuel
- 57 Pantyhose color
- 59 Poet's twilights
- 61 Runner's unit
- 62 Crowning point
- 63 Go first
- 66 Map dir.

PREVIOUS PUZZLE SOLVED

D	R	A	M	A	P	A	S	S	A	B	E	D	
E	A	G	E	R	O	P	E	C	P	A	I	R	
K	N	U	T	E	L	E	N	O	S	U	N	S	
E	T	E	R	N	A	L	S	T	R	O	D	E	
W	A	S	P	I	G	O	R	N	I	G	H	T	
A	L	L	O	T	T	E	D	V	E	N	E	E	R
I	T	A	L	I	A	N	V	A	G	U	E	L	I
S	A	T	I	N	S	L	I	C	E	N	S	E	S
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E	G	A	D	N	R	A							
G	O	B	L	I	N	S	T	A	T	U	R	E	
O	L	L	A	B	A	S	E	M	I	R	E	D	
R	E	A	R	E	M	I	R	P	O	S	E	D	
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64					65			66		67		
68					69				70			
71					72					73		

SUDOKU

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9	5	7	1	8	3	4	6	2
3	6	1	5	2	4	9	7	8
8	4	2	9	6	7	1	5	3
6	7	8	2	1	5	3	9	4
1	9	5	4	3	8	7	2	6
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YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

Young, rich and racy: South Korea's livestreamers

In a country that has long stressed academic qualifications, 'content creator' now ranks fourth in a survey of most desired jobs.

DANIEL DE CARTERET
SEOUL

From a converted store-room on the roof of his mother's Seoul apartment, Kim Min-kyo plays video games for up to 15 hours a day—and makes a fortune from the thousands of fans watching him.

The cramped studio is an unlikely home for a budding millionaire, but the 24-year-old's gaming prowess—mixed with quick-witted commentary and high-school-level humour—has seen his income climb to about \$50,000 a month.

That puts him well into the top one percent of earners in South Korea, but has not affected his lifestyle.

"I'm not really into cars or spending lots of money," said Kim, who eats, sleeps, washes and works in the small space.

"My mum manages all my income so I never have a lot of money on me," he told AFP.

Livestreamers, known as "Broadcast Jockeys" or BJs in South Korea, are hard-wired to the digital infrastructure of youth culture.

They entertain for hours with an interactive mishmash of chat, gaming, dance, music, eating, getting drunk or even just sleeping.

Top livestreamers enjoy subculture celebrity among teens and 20-somethings, who consider them more relatable than traditional media stars.

A few can earn over \$100,000 in a good month from broadcasting live on homegrown platform AfreecaTV, and uploading edited content to YouTube.

Kim, who often streams himself playing online battle game League of Legends in his pyjamas, builds on his content with conversations that flirt with the country's social boundaries.

"Maybe sometimes you need to do something absurd to attract followers," he acknowledged.

He makes money from fan donations, sponsorship—sometimes consuming local energy drinks midstream—and advertising on YouTube, where he has more than



Joshua Ahn, CEO of South Korean production company Starfish Entertainment, poses during an interview with AFP at his home in Seoul.

AFP/RSS

400,000 subscribers.

There is regular controversy in South Korea over a lack of regulation on livestreaming, from undisclosed product promotion to "lewd" behaviour—a bar set relatively low in a conservative culture.

Some livestreamers have been called out for misogynist commentary and violent behaviour.

And at any given hour it is easy to find scantily-clad women on AfreecaTV willing to "talk cute", "dance sexy" or send a private video for the right price.

For livestreamers, the coronavirus has been good for business.

With the world under lockdown for much of last year, the coronavirus has been good for business for livestreamers.

Over the first four months of last year, as the South urged people to stay at home to control the outbreak's first wave, time watching videos on smartphones surged, according to the Korea Communications Commission.

YouTube said it saw huge spikes in global viewership last year, including in South Korea.

AfreecaTV, which now hosts about 17,000 livestreamers, sells "starballoons" to viewers for 110 won (\$0.10) each.

The audience can donate them while interacting with a livestreamer, who converts it back to cash with the platform taking a cut.

Donations on it climbed by more than 20 percent to 41.5 billion won in the third quarter of last year.

"Even though it's sad that Covid-19 has happened, it would be a lie to say that it hasn't helped BJs grow," said Joshua Ahn, who heads local production company Starfish Entertainment.

The 44-year-old Maserati-driving media entrepreneur manages dozens of top livestreamers,

and produces variety shows for some of the country's biggest TV stations.

Only a small fraction of streamers make significant sums, but Ahn said the stars who were already earning tens of thousands of dollars a month have seen their takings "double or even triple" during the pandemic.

The hyper-wired South is often at the forefront of technological change—it launched the world's first nationwide 5G networks in 2019, two years after internet television subscriptions overtook cable TV.

Mobile advertising revenue tripled between 2015 and 2019 to 4.56 trillion won, according to regulators, overtaking broadcast advertising along the way, which fell by almost a quarter.

"Conventional media is at an important crossroads," said Ahn, whose business activities straddle both traditional and new media. "Now with YouTube, anyone can have their own channel."

Some livestreamers have moved into the mainstream, including appearances on TV variety shows and sports commentating.

Meanwhile minor celebrities, financial analysts and even some politicians have turned to livestreaming to boost their profiles.

And in a country that has long stressed academic qualifications, "content creator" ranked fourth in a survey of primary schoolchildren's most desired jobs last year.

South Korea's best-known contribution to the global livestreaming phenomenon has been "mukbang", where the host commentates while eating huge plates of food.

Some broadcast activities are more controversial, such as scantily-clad suggestive conversation, or even criminal, for instance threats of violence against rivals.

"The reason why the content of these BJs is getting more sexual and violent is because they seek more attention," said California State University Monterey Bay researcher Hojin Song.

"The more audience that they can draw in, the better chance they get at making better money."

— Agence France-Press

No Oscars or sensitive art spark Hong Kong censorship fears

Amid the decisions that were taken, concerns are being raised that Beijing's crackdown on dissent in the city is extending to arts and entertainment.



People walk in front of 'M+' visual culture museum in the West Kowloon Cultural District of Hong Kong.

AFP/RSS

ZEN SOO
HONG KONG

Decisions in Hong Kong not to display a politically sensitive photograph in a museum exhibition and not broadcast the annual Academy Awards for the first time in decades have prompted concerns that Beijing's crackdown on dissent in the city is extending to arts and entertainment.

Hong Kong authorities have taken a tougher stance on opposition following Beijing's imposition of a national security law on

loyalists. Henry Tang, head of the city's West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, said at a news conference Monday that there are no plans to exhibit a photo at the opening of the city's new M+ museum by dissident Chinese artist Ai Weiwei showing him holding up his middle finger at Tiananmen Square in Beijing.

The decision prompted concern that the security law will not just be used to silence dissent but also to intervene in freedom of art and expression.

Tang dismissed suspicion that the museum was under pressure to remove the photo, saying there never were plans to include it.

them," he said.

Ai, the artist, was not immediately available for comment.

Earlier this month, Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam said authorities were on "full alert" to ensure that exhibitions in the city do not violate the national security law. Pro-Beijing lawmakers have said that some of M+'s artwork is politically sensitive and could be in breach of the legislation.

Separately, public broadcaster TVB confirmed Monday that it will not air this year's Academy Awards ceremony for the first time in decades.

A report by local newspaper The Standard suggested that earlier critical comments about mainland China by Chloe Zhao, the Beijing-born director of nominated film "Nomadland," as well as the nomination of a short documentary about the 2019 protests in Hong Kong could be linked to the decision not to broadcast the ceremony this year.

"TVB does not have the broadcasting rights for The Oscars 2021. It was purely a commercial decision that we decided not to pursue the Oscars this year," TVB said in a statement.

Old comments by Zhao in which she was perceived to be criticising mainland China sparked outrage in the country. Searches for "Nomadland" were blocked on the Chinese internet.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Awards, which presents the awards, could not immediately be reached for comment.

In Beijing, proposed changes to Hong Kong's electoral system were submitted to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress at the opening of its session on Monday, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

Under the proposals, the make-up of a committee that chooses the leader would be changed, and the committee would be given the power to pick a large share of the legislature. The changes are expected to reduce the proportion of lawmakers elected by direct vote, though details have not been released yet.

— Associated Press

The announcements came as China's top legislature began deliberating a revamp to Hong Kong's election laws.

the city, arresting prominent pro-democracy activists and participants in anti-government protests in 2019.

The twin announcements on the Oscars and the photograph came as China's top legislature began deliberating a revamp to Hong Kong's election laws that would put more power in the hands of a committee dominated by Beijing

"We have never planned for that photograph to be included in the opening exhibition, so there is no question that we have retracted it, or we have succumbed to pressure and have changed it," Tang said.

"If any of our works or any of our actions contravenes any such law, I'm sure the law enforcement agencies will get in touch with us and we will co-operate fully with

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