

## **Modest spread of Covid-19 in Nepal, but economic freeze is biting**

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Nepal was the first country in South Asia to report incidence of Covid-19 on Jan 24, 2020 when a 32 year Nepalese student tested positive for the infection after returning from Wuhan, the epicenter of the deadly disease in China.

By March 31, there were only 5 confirmed (Covid-19) cases in Nepal and all of them had returned from countries with novel Coronavirus outbreaks. Apart from the first case reported in January, all remaining cases (4 of them) surfaced during the last week of March.

Since all known cases of Covid-19 are imported, it is assumed that there is no incidence of local transmission of virus as yet in the landlocked Himalayan country that shares borders with India (1,800 kilometres) and China (1,414 kilometres).

It is suspected that the fewer number of infections being reported by Nepal is due to less than 1,000 tests done so far in the country with a population of nearly 30 million.

The country has been woefully unprepared despite its high vulnerability. There are hardly any properly equipped laboratories and hospitals for diagnosis and treatment of the patients. Hospitals don't have dedicated isolation wards and the country lacks experience in managing isolation wards. Therefore, separate cabins were designated at one of the public hospitals for suspected patients. One of the hospitals, Teku Hospital (Khatmandu), had set up isolation ward during the avian influenza outbreak over a decade ago, but it was never brought into use.

Moreover, there is a critical shortage of ICU beds in the country with just three in Teku hospital.

The government's immediate response after the confirmation of the first case was to establish a health desk at Tribhuvan International Airport, the country's only international airport where incoming passengers were screened with infrared thermometers.

Ministry of Health and Population further deputed monitoring teams and set up health desks at major border check-points and cities such as Kathmandu, Lumbini, Chitwan, Pokhara, Bhairahawa and Ilam. This response was motivated by the fears that the tourists visiting the country and returning nationals could bring infection with them. Nepal, it need to be remembered, is a major tourist destination. It hosted over a million tourists in 2018. Chinese made up the second largest group in terms of total number of tourists visiting Nepal, which was celebrating 2020 as the 'Visit Nepal' Year.

Moreover, China is Nepal's second largest trading partner.

The government, besides, publicizing a list of precautionary measures did not undertake any major public awareness campaign against the disease.

The government, however, swung into action around the time second case was reported in the last week of March. All border crossings were closed and international flights were stopped on March 22 and the lockdown went into effect on March 24, 2020.

In view of inadequate quarantine facilities, Nepalese authorities, following the closure of the borders, refused return to its nationals returning from India. Thousands were, therefore, stranded at Darchula, on

Nepal's western border with India, when they attempted to return home after India imposed a complete lockdown on March 24. Nearly a million Nepalese live and work in India as low wage labourers. According to reports in media, some have, however, managed to slip in, evading border controls. Returnees are, moreover, afraid of declaring themselves out of the fear of being stigmatized as disease carriers after government authorities began putting red colored cross signs on homes of people returning from other countries.

Educational institutions were closed and examinations were postponed. An effort was initiated to strengthen the diagnostic and treatment facilities by upgrading laboratories and setting up ICU units and isolation beds.

Since tourism is the mainstay of Nepalese economy, government took special measures to provide transport for tourists stranded outside Kathmandu and unable to move due to the lockdown across the country. Special procedures were set up enabling foreign embassies to notify the authorities about their citizens outside main tourist locations.

There are apprehensions that closure of borders and halt in trade with China for over a month now could lead to serious food shortages and price hike in the landlocked country.

Both India and China have assured Nepal that they would help in meeting its needs for medicines and medical equipment.

Update: The total number of Covid-19 cases in Nepal reached 12, with no death, on April 12, 2020. The nationwide lockdown will remain in force until April 15.