

Nepal declares one-week coronavirus lockdown

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The Nepalese government has declared a one-week lockdown of the country after health authorities detected a second COVID-19 infection on Monday. The 19-year-old student who returned from Paris, via Qatar, last week is currently being treated at the Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Diseases Hospital in Kathmandu. Her family is being kept in home isolation. The first coronavirus infection in Nepal—a student returning from China—was detected in January.

The defence ministry said the lockdown, which began yesterday, would be a “strict stay-at-home order” and curfew. All government offices, businesses and shops are closed with international and domestic flights and public transport shut down. The hardest hit will be daily wage earners. Already, 1.5 million people, many of them workers, have left Kathmandu, the capital, for their homes in rural districts.

The government has now sealed the country’s 1,800-kilometre border with India. The landlocked country’s main entry-exit points are with India and recently established transit points to China. A week ago, cross-border movements were partially restricted. Hundreds of Nepalese previously blocked at Indian border crossings were allowed to return home on Monday, a day before the curfew began, after taking a temperature test.

Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli and his so-called Left Alliance government have been denounced in the national media for failing to take adequate precautionary measures over coronavirus or to provide health workers with sufficient supplies of personal protective equipment, face masks and caps or training.

On Monday, the *Nepali Times* said that most public health experts were “convinced” that there were infected people in the country and reported that there had been a “lack of preventive measures and diagnostic

tests until this week.”

The *Kathmandu Post* noted on March 20 that health workers panicked and burst into tears when a person suspected of contracting COVID-19 visited the Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital. A few days later, doctors and nurses at the Tribhuvan University (TU) Teaching Hospital threatened to stop attending work if they were not provided with proper protection.

At Sumeru Hospital in Lalitpur, over 20 workers, including nurses and doctors, applied for leave on Saturday. “The number of staffers applying for leave has been rising by the day,” Hemraj Dahal, the hospital’s chairman, told the *Post*. “It’s not difficult to guess the reason. Health workers fear that the coronavirus could spread.”

Nurses, lab technicians and other health workers also applied for leave last week at Green City Hospital in Basundhara. “We’ve been sewing our own cloth masks to use in the hospital,” manager Manish Dawadi told the newspaper.

Dr. Subhash Prasad Acharya, head of critical care at the TU Teaching Hospital, said: “It would be disastrous to compel them to attend to such patients without providing them with safety training and equipment.”

Government officials and health authorities have attempted to downplay the coronavirus dangers and their inaction.

COVID-19 has so far killed over 17,000 people and infected more than 400,000 globally, but Department of Health Services director-general Mahendra Prasad Shrestha claimed no special training was required. “It is impossible to impart [new knowledge] to all health workers whenever new diseases emerge,” he declared, claiming that this was only necessary for “those involved in critical care.”

The National Public Health Laboratory is currently the only facility in Nepal able to test for coronavirus. Laboratory director Dr. Runa Jha told the media that it was only equipped to test 500 coronavirus cases per week. This could be increased to 3,000 cases, he said, if adequate human resources, proper infrastructure and chemical reagents were provided.

The laboratory's chief medical technologist admitted that the facility had been using only 1,000 testing kits provided by the WHO. Authorities had requested 5,000 more kits but they had not arrived.

The Nepali government currently does not have any plan to conduct tests at other locations, let alone provide proper health care for those infected.

The *Himalayan Times* noted: "The government has this indifferent attitude at a time when the South Korean experience tells that containing the spread of the virus could be a tough nut to crack."

Although mass testing for coronavirus, quarantining and treatment of those infected should be the immediate response to this deadly disease, those reporting coughs, fever and other symptoms are being turned away in Nepal because of meager resources. Dr. Sundar Mani Dixit told the media on March 17 that three patients he referred to the Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital were not tested. His patients had just returned from overseas.

The government's main concern, however, is not the health and safety of medical professionals and ordinary people, but the impact of the lockdown on the tourist business which employs 1.5 million and provides the government with \$US2 billion in annual revenue. While thousands of people in the tourist industry will lose their jobs, the government has not announced any relief program for these workers and their families.

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in Asia with around 50 percent of children up to five years old suffering acute malnutrition. A quarter of its 29 million-strong population lives on less than 35 rupees (\$0.29) a day and 66 percent of all deaths in the country are the result of non-communicable diseases.

Nepal has the second worst rate of deaths from lung disease in the world, with 101 per 100,000 dying from lung ailments every year, including around 70,000 people infected with tuberculosis.

The criminal, grossly inadequate response of the Nepali government to COVID-19 guarantees that tens

of thousands of people will die from this highly contagious disease.



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