

# Another wave of COVID-19 infections looms in Nepal

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According to the most recent figures, 28 people died from COVID-19 and 1,581 were infected over the weekend in Nepal, taking its cumulative death toll from the pandemic to 11,040 people and 784,566 infections.

The unreliable official numbers have declined in Nepal since infections and deaths peaked in April and May this year. However, a third wave of the pandemic has hit India and is threatening to cross into the small Himalayan country of 28 million people where millions live in poverty.

The Nepali ruling elite, like their counterparts internationally, have put profits before human lives. Former Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli's administration and the current government led by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba have failed to implement serious health and safety measures to deal with COVID-19 and the highly infectious Delta variant.

The Deuba government was installed in June, after the country's Supreme Court reinstated parliament, which had been prematurely dissolved in May for the second time by President Bidya Devi Bhandari.

On September 13, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) issued a damning 50-page briefing paper on Nepal entitled "Unprepared and Unlawful."

The paper declared that Nepal's response to COVID-19 was inadequate and had not implemented advice on the coronavirus from international authorities or orders from the country's Supreme Court. The ICJ document follows a report issued last November on Katmandu's response to the pandemic in 2020. Both reports are an indictment, not just of the Oli and Deuba regimes but the entire Nepali elite.

Citing ICJ legal advisor Karuna Parajuli, this week's "Unprepared and Unlawful" report said that the government had "failed to prepare for the 2021 resurgence properly." The vaccination rollout plan, the

report said, had not been transparent and timely with the government missing its own targets; patients were over-charged at private hospitals; non-COVID patients were not provided with adequate health care; health workers had been attacked; and the country's prisons were unsafe and overcrowded.

The ICJ called for the right to health to be guaranteed for all including: uninterrupted supply of oxygen, increased beds, ICU capacity and medicine and equipment to all hospitals treating pandemic patients; no overcrowding of prisons and the introduction of proper safety measures; private hospitals to follow legal requirements; and public disclosure of vaccine contracts with pharmaceutical companies.

The ICJ also condemned repeated statements by previous Prime Minister Oli "downplaying" the seriousness of the pandemic and claiming that the coronavirus was like the flu and could be blocked by hot water and sneezing. He also insisted that because Nepal had fresh air, and garlic, ginger and turmeric were an integral part of the daily diet, the country's inhabitants had better immunity against COVID-19.

The vaccination rate in Nepal remains dangerously low. Around 5.12 million or 17 percent of the population have been fully vaccinated and only 5.74 million or 19 percent have received just one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

According to some medical experts, the September-November religious festival season in India could produce another coronavirus outbreak in that country and rapidly spread to Nepal. The countries share a 1,770 km open border with hundreds of thousands of migrant workers regularly crossing.

India's second wave of the pandemic in 2020 was mirrored in Nepal and saw hospitals turning away patients because there were not enough ICU beds,

ventilators and oxygen. The fast-spreading Delta variant first found in India is now being seen in most Nepali cases. Shortages of testing equipment have worsened the situation as only symptomatic cases are being screened, even at the official border crossings.

Dr Sher Bahadur Pun, Clinical Research Unit chief at the Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital, told the *Kathmandu Post* that the Delta variant was circulating through Nepal “with little to no restrictions.” He said that “monitoring of violations of health protocols has not been effective.”

The pandemic has had a drastic impact on the Nepali economy which depends heavily on the tourist industry and remittances from the migrant workers. Travel and tourism, which constitutes about 8 percent of the country’s gross domestic product, has virtually collapsed. The sector used to generate up to \$500 million annually and provide jobs for an estimated 1.5 million workers in the hotel, airline, transportation, accommodation, restaurant and leisure industries.

Tourist arrivals have dropped precipitously with income expected to fall by \$330 million this year, wiping out even more jobs, the *Himalayan Times* reported in July. Government authorities have made no attempt to resolve the serious economic hardships facing workers in this industry.

Temple Tiger Group executive chairman Basant Raj Mishra told the *Kathmandu Post* on September 12: “Undoubtedly, hotels and restaurants are the big losers. Some survived the pandemic because of the movement of domestic tourists. But in the last few years, development of hotels has been at such a rapid pace that domestic tourism cannot sustain them all.”

The number of Nepali children in poverty has increased four times to around six million in the past year. Nationwide COVID-19 lockdowns have impacted on students with two-thirds of the country’s eight million students unable to attend any kind of online learning programs. The school closures also meant that they could not receive the limited free meals provided by the Nepal School Meals Program.

At the same time, child labour has climbed to new levels. According to Human Rights Watch, a third of the Nepali children the agency interviewed worked at least 12 hours per day for as little as 517 rupees (\$US4.44), with many suffering serious work injuries.

Professor Pasang Sherpa from the Nepal Institute of

Health Sciences told the *Borgen Magazine* that the pandemic “has made poverty far worse than I have seen in my life so far.”

According to last month’s “Nepal: Multidimensional Poverty Index 2021” report, 36 percent of the multidimensionally poor people in Nepal live in crowded households, a major factor in the spread of coronavirus infections. Similarly, 38.2 percent of people in Nepal do not have access to hand-washing facilities with soap in their homes.

Indifferent to these unsafe conditions and another even more deadly wave of coronavirus infections, the Nepali government, like others around the world, are planning to reopen schools, insisting that the population must learn to “live with the virus.”



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