Focused COVID-19 Media Monitoring, Nepal
EMERGING THEME(S)

- New variant of coronavirus — B.1.617.2 — found in Nepal: Health Ministry
- 8,136 new COVID-19 cases, 196 deaths reported on May 18; Nepal's death rate comparatively higher than other South Asian countries, says ex-director of Epidemiology and Disease Control Division; two wards of Belaka and Triyuga municipalities sealed
- COVID-19 third wave may start sooner than later, kids and those not vaccinated more at risk from the infection, say health experts emphasizing on the need for vaccination
- With COVAX in limbo, Nepal’s COVID-19 vaccination drive faces serious uncertainties; government doesn’t have the vaccine to administer booster dose to 65-plus group
- Darchula has no PCR testing machines, has to rely on Antigen Tests for COVID-19 confirmation, but now facing shortage of Antigen Test kits; hundreds in Ramechhap showing COVID-like symptoms, but no testing, treatment done as district lacks PCR facility; patients of other illnesses in Sindhuli getting medicines from pharmacies as COVID-19 patients being treated in district hospital for lack of a COVID-hospital; no contact tracing in Makwanpur though cases surging
- Health Ministry’s data on empty beds in hospitals incorrect; government planning a unified command for COVID-19 response for leadership in Health Ministry; Supreme Court orders government to ensure COVID-19 infected do not leave hospitals without getting treatment, asks for fortnightly report
- Health Ministry urges the public to abide by prohibitory orders in the fight against COVID-19; flouting of prohibitory orders rampant in back alleys, old quarters of the Capital; Sarlahi locals openly flouting prohibition

1 This intelligence is tracked through manually monitoring national print, digital and online media through a representative sample selection, and consultations with media persons and media influencers.
• Antigen testing begins in Kathmandu’s high-risk areas-communities starting from Kalimati Vegetables and Fruit Market on May 18
• Government, WHO have not recommended use of remdesivir in treatment of COVID-19 patients, medical professionals prescribing it at their own discretion, says Health Ministry
• India stops plasma therapy in the treatment of COVID-19 infected

RECURRING THEME(S)

• Daily wage earners stare at dire times due to the lockdown
• Home isolation not feasible for most COVID-infected in Baitadi; Myagdi locals getting admitted to hospitals as many in home isolation died due to lack of timely treatment
• Ill-equipped hospitals adding to the burden of country’s COVID-19 crisis
• Government scrambling to set up oxygen plants in hospitals; Finance Minister releases funds for the same; hospitals and local levels pooling in efforts to address oxygen shortage issue
• As Nepal reels under surging COVID-19 infections and deaths, people from far and near band together to provide aid

ISSUE(S) IN FOCUS

A new variant of coronavirus has been found in Nepal. In the gene sequencing done in India of 35 samples collected from different parts of Nepal in coordination with the World Health Organization, a new variant of coronavirus B.1.617.2 was found in 34 samples, and B.1.617.1 variant in one sample. With this, three types of new virus variants have been reported in Nepal, according to the Ministry of Health and Population.²

² Setopati
As many as 8,136 new COVID-19 cases were registered on May 18 in the last 24 hours, while the nationwide COVID-19 death toll rose to 5,411 as 196 more people succumbed to the contagion, according to the Ministry of Health and Population.  

Nepal’s COVID-19 death rate is comparatively higher than that of other South Asian countries. The death rate would not be so high had the government done proper management, according to Dr Baburam Marasini, former director at Epidemiology and Disease Control Division.  

The District Administration Office of Udayapur has given instructions to seal the two wards of Belaka and Triyuga municipalities of the district after a surge in COVID-19 infections there.  

Most of the people in Hilihang Rural Municipality of Panchthar have been suffering from fever, while the majority of them who tested for COVID-19 have been found to be positive.  

COVID-19 infection has been spreading in five rural municipalities of Humla namely Simkot, Sarkegaad, Chankheli, Taanjakot, and Adaanchuli, increasing the risk of infection in these rural municipalities.  

The COVID-19 infection brought to Singa and Tatopani areas of Gulmi district by visitors coming to take a bath at Tatopani has spread to the households of locals there through gatherings at feasts.  

The rate of COVID-19 infection has decreased in the past two days in Banke.  

Around 300 people attended the funeral of a local of Nalgad Municipality of Jajarkot who died due to COVID-19. Now the infection has spread across the municipality and most people are not well. However, due to lack of testing, locals are taking medicine for cough and cold randomly.  

There are around 30,000 COVID-19 positive people in Kathmandu Metropolitan City. However, as the local levels are not
working as promised, most of the infected are staying in home isolation while hospitals are all packed. Many infected are undergoing treatment on the hospital premises due to shortage of beds, while people are dying due to lack of oxygen and beds.  

Five hundred Nepal Police personnel have been infected in the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic, while two have lost their lives.  

Health experts have emphasized that the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic may start sooner than later and preparations need to be made accordingly. They have analyzed that children and people who are not vaccinated will be affected more in the third wave.  

Stating that children will be highly affected by the third wave of COVID-19, leader of Nepali Congress Sher Bahadur Deuba has demanded the government make preparations for inoculation of those above 12 years of age.  

According to the government schedule, the booster doses to 1.3 million people should have been given starting from May 17. We do not have vaccines to provide second shots to people above 65 years old, who were given the first dose in the second phase, according to Dr Samir Kumar Adhikari, Joint Spokesperson for the Ministry of Health and Population. The Ministry can say when they will get their second shots only after they receive the vaccine. Government officials say their only hope now is COVAX, which has committed to providing Nepal with 13 million doses to inoculate 6 million people. However, the COVID-19 crisis in India has left COVAX in the lurch.  

India’s ban on export of vaccines might continue till October. It will affect the vaccine distribution program of COVAX.  

The government will arrange to provide the second dose of Vero Cell vaccine to those who are outside Kathmandu Valley,

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according to Dr Jhalak Sharma Gautam, Head of Immunization Division. Likewise, those infected with COVID-19 should not take the vaccine for a month; the government will make separate arrangements for them to get vaccinated. 17

The Lalitpur Metropolitan City will start giving the second dose of Vero Cell vaccine from May 20. 18

Former vice-chancellors have demanded that the government provide the second dose of the vaccine against COVID-19 to those who have taken the first dose. 19

Darchula has to rely on Antigen Tests to determine the rate of infection in the district since none of its health institutions has PCR machines. Health officials in the district are saying they are now facing a shortage of Antigen Test kits, which stand to hamper the testing rate amid a surge of COVID-19 cases. 20

Hundreds of people have fallen ill with COVID-like symptoms in the rural areas of Ramechhap, but their testing and treatment have not been done as the district lacks the facility to conduct PCR tests. In Sindhuli COVID-19 patients are being treated at the Sindhuli Hospital as the district lacks a COVID-hospital, so the patients of other illnesses are visiting pharmacies where they are given medicines on the basis of the symptoms without undergoing check-ups. 21

The representatives of local levels of Sindhuli have been infected with COVID-19 while visiting households in their respective areas to know about the condition of the infected. 22

No contact tracing has been done in Makwanpur despite the daily surge in infections in the district. The risk of infection has increased as those who have come into contact with the infected are not in quarantine. 23

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18 Onlinekhabar
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20 The Kathmandu Post
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The Ministry of Health and Population has released a list of beds that are empty in hospitals for the treatment of COVID-19 patients. However, the patients have not been able to get the beds in the said hospitals as the data is wrong, say the hospitals. The Ministry’s data has quoted that a higher number of beds, ICUs and ventilators are empty than actually are. 24

The government is preparing to form a unified command under the leadership of the Ministry of Health and Population for the control and containment of COVID-19. 25

The Health Emergency Operation Center has proposed that Karnali Provincial Hospital of Birendranagar be put under the federal government. Preparations are being made to take the proposal to the Cabinet for approval. The step has been taken as the provincial government has been accused of not operating it properly. 26

The Supreme Court has issued an interim order to the government to arrange for temporary beds if there is shortage of beds in hospitals for the treatment of COVID-19 patients. 27

The Supreme Court has ordered the government to ensure that COVID-infected people do not return from hospitals without getting treatment. It has also ordered the Ministry of Health and Population to report to the Supreme Court on whether the order has been followed or not every 15 days. 28

The Supreme Court has passed an interim order not to fine or keep those not wearing a mask in a holding center. Police have been fining those not wearing masks and keeping them in a holding center at present. 29
more challenging and requested people to follow health measures, abide by the prohibitory orders and cooperate in the fight against the deadly virus.  

The Ministry of Health and Population has said there has been a reduction in people’s movement by just 59 per cent during the prohibitory orders in Kathmandu. However, Chief District Officer Kali Prasad Parajuli has claimed to have made stringent measures to control the movement.

The Ministry of Health and Population has said the COVID-19 pandemic has not come under control due to the weddings, thread wearing ceremonies, inaugurations and public gatherings being organized. It has requested the public to stop such events and also asked the infected people not to roam around.

In the lack of strict enforcement of restrictions, many grocery shops, green grocers and even liquor shops among others, especially those in the city’s back alleys, have been operating even during evenings. Many shops in the old quarters of Patan and Kathmandu have been found operating throughout the day. Virologists and doctors say lockdown violation could prove costly, so authorities should enforce restrictions strictly.

It has been 10 days since the District Administration Office Sarlahi imposed prohibitory orders in the district, but the locals are not heeding it. They have instead been organizing wedding feasts, thread wearing ceremonies like in normal times. The authorities concerned are also not paying attention to controlling crowds.

Makawanpur has allowed grocery and food stores to open just twice a week in the urban areas. This has increased the crowd of shoppers, increasing the risk of infection.

Antigen Test has started in different high risk communities of Kathmandu from May 18. The test was first conducted in Kalimati

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30 The Himalayan Times  
31 Baarhakhari  
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33 The Kathmandu Post  
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### Vegetables and Fruit Market

The plan is to carry out around 10,000 tests in the first phase.  

### Neither the World Health Organization nor the Nepal government has recommended remdesivir to be used in the treatment of COVID-19

According to Dr Samir Kumar Adhikari, Assistant Spokesperson at the Ministry of Health and Population, he said that medical professionals are using it in the belief that some medicine has to be given to patients, but there is no evidence of it working.  

### The pharmacy at Birat Medical College is found to be involved in black marketing of Remdesivir medicine

The Department of Drug Administration Biratnagar and Morang Police found the medicine kept hidden to sell it in the black market.  

### The use of plasma therapy in the treatment of COVID-19 patients has been stopped in India

The Indian Council of Medical Research changed its guidelines stating that no evidence was found that plasma therapy is either helpful or improves the condition of the infected.  

### Prohibitory orders imposed in Kathmandu Valley and across the country have started taking its toll on daily wage earners in urban areas making it difficult for them to survive in the city

Many laborers in Salyan are compelled to work in the field every day to make ends meet, exposing themselves to the virus. Most of the workers who used work in hotels and restaurants have also become jobless because of the prohibitory orders in place. They are now working as daily wage workers.  

### Most of the COVID-infected are in home isolation in Baitadi

However, the households here are not suitable for home isolation as people need to share a common toilet and tap due to which the infection is spreading in the district.  

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37 Kantipur  
38 Setopati  
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40 The Himalayan Times  
41 The Kathmandu Post
After the number of people staying in home isolation dying in the lack of timely hospital treatment increased in Myagdi, the number of people getting admitted to Beni Hospital has increased in the past one week. The hospital had requested people with severe symptoms to get admitted to the hospital after most COVID-deaths were found to be due to low oxygen and pneumonia. 43

The Ministry of Health and Population has requested all and sundry not to set up isolation centers randomly without following protocols. 44

People staying in home isolation in different places of Sudurpaschim Province are deprived of any doctor’s consultation. There has also been a delay in the management of the bodies of COVID-dead. 45

Isolation centers have been set up in wards 28 and 29 of Harisiddhi of Lalitpur. 46

Out of the total COVID-positive people, 7,447 are in institutionalized isolation — 1,590 are in ICUs, and 390 on ventilators. Rest of the population is in home isolation. 47

The ventilator at the District Hospital in Dailekh has been kept in storage since the past one year due to lack of trained manpower to operate it. 48

COVID-19 patients are dying in ambulances while looking for beds in hospitals. According to ambulance drivers, they carry patients for up to six hours in hopes of getting bed and oxygen but many lose life before this. 49

It’s been over a year since COVID-19 infection entered the country, but the government has not been able to start a reliable
COVID-hospital in Province 2. Had there been a reliable hospital with ventilator service, the need to rush infected locals to other provinces would not have risen. People would not have lost their lives while searching for hospitals, and also would not have had to bear the burden of loan to pay the treatment cost at private hospitals.  

The Antigen Test kits procured by some local levels of Pyuthan have been found to be of low quality. The low quality was discovered after all COVID-19 tests done using those kits came back negative.  

The Nobel Medical College of Biratnagar has said it is giving free treatment to COVID-19 patients from April 29, but the patients admitted there have been forced to pay thousands of rupees just for PPEs, masks, gloves and face shields.  

Three COVID-special hospitals have been added in Province 1 within the span of a week. Yet the hospitals are not being able to address the flow of COVID-19 patients, many are still forced to get treatment on the hospital’s premises and opt for home isolation.  

A cleaning staff at Kathmandu Metropolitan City got infected with COVID-19 while on duty. All nine members of his family have been infected. He is on oxygen support undergoing treatment on the floor of Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospital, Teku and has complained of not getting a bed.  

A budget of Rs 10,000,000 has been released on the initiation of Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali for the construction of an oxygen plant at the District Hospital of Tamghas.  

The Ministry of Finance has agreed to release an additional sum of about Rs 170,000,000 for the establishment of oxygen plants in 11 hospitals and to set up an oxygen pipeline in one hospital of the country.
The hospitals of Chitwan are expanding the capacity of their oxygen plants after the district started facing a shortage of oxygen. Bharatpur Hospital and two medical colleges are working towards it after oxygen supply from outside the district stopped. 57

A liquid oxygen tanker set up at Bheri Hospital can address the hospital’s oxygen shortage if it is operated regularly. However, there is no certainty to this as the Shankar Gas Industry, which has been tasked with the responsibility to fill the tanker, says it won’t be able to supply the hospital with liquid oxygen immediately due to a shortage of tankers carrying it. 58

The Bheri Hospital has set up an oxygen tank to alleviate shortage of oxygen and not let it affect the hospital’s functioning. 59

Campaigns are being conducted in Sudurpaschim Province on managing oxygen. Dhangadi Sub-Metropolis has set up a welfare fund. Mayor Nripadahadru Wada has urged all donor agencies, organizations and businessmen to make contribution to the fund saying the amount will be utilized for the installation of oxygen plants, management of oxygen cylinders and control over the aggressively spreading virus. 60

The Province 2 government has set up an oxygen gas monitoring management committee. The committee formed under the leadership of Minister of Law Gyanendra Yadav aims to prevent shortage of oxygen in hospitals. 61

The Nepal Academy of Science and Technology has conducted a successful production test of an oxygen cylinder for the first time in Nepal. Permission will now be given for commercial production of these oxygen cylinders. 62

There are 5,801 cylinders in Gandaki Province but only 850 of them are being used at present. As such there is no shortage of oxygen in the Province. 63

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58 Setopati
59 Annapurna Post
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Oxygen cylinders that have remained unused are being collected across the nation to address the shortage of oxygen. However, one should not collect random cylinders as some cylinders are also filled with toxic gases, as per experts. They have urged caution while collecting oxygen cylinders. 64

The Sukraraj Tropical Infectious Disease Hospital, Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital, Bir Hospital and Patan Hospital of Kathmandu Valley have claimed that they have not sent back critically ill COVID-19 patients who need hospitalization citing shortage of oxygen as reason. 65

People with big hearts have been helping COVID-19 infected people by arranging plasma, oxygen cylinders, nutritious food, wood for cremation, food at hospitals at affordable rates, setting up of food banks, giving PPEs, gloves and masks to hospitals, visiting households to treat the infected in Nepalgunj, Rupandehi, and Kapilvastu. 66

The government of Switzerland will send healthcare materials needed to fight COVID-19 to Nepal by this week. 67

German Ambassador to Nepal Roland Schafer has said Germany and the European Union will provide support to Nepal continuously to control the COVID-19 pandemic. 68

A non-profit organization — Ventilator Services Company Ltd — has been buying new ventilators and letting government hospitals use it free of cost, while it has been renting it out to private hospitals. 69

The Dhurmus-Suntali Foundation has given 50 oxygen cylinders to the newly set-up COVID-19 ward at BP Koirala Memorial Cancer Hospital of Bharatpur, Chitwan. 70

Tamsek Foundation Singapore, Lotus Life Foundation Singapore, and Gorkha Brewery are providing joint support to the
Ministry of Health and Population for the treatment of COVID-19 patients — they will provide healthcare materials worth over Rs 200,000,000 for the same.  

Nepal Police has speeded up its effort to search for oxygen cylinders hidden in different places.

Nepal Police claimed that it had collected nearly 9,000 oxygen cylinders hoarded by various industries, people and businesses.

The Embassy of Nepal in Madrid has been continuously engaging with the Spanish government in an effort to solicit urgent emergency COVID-19 assistance.

In the wake of growing complaints about negligence in treatment of COVID-19 patients, the COVID Action team formed by youths has started monitoring hospitals in Birgunj, Parsa. In case any shortcoming or negligence is seen, the team will inform the authority concerned about the same.

Nepal Youth Entrepreneurs Forum has provided a total of 40 oxygen cylinders of a capacity of 47 liters to Bir Hospital and Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital.

Met Life Foundation is set to give grant an assistance of US$50,000 to America Nepal Medical Foundation to provide medical services to people affected by COVID-19 in Nepal.

The government is set to provide subsidies when bringing healthcare materials procured by the private sector as well as those given by Nepalis living in foreign countries. The Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supply has given the responsibility of

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coordinating this to the National Innovation Center.  

The Batase Foundation has started a campaign to collect Rs 100 to set up oxygen plant and concentrator banks in community and government hospitals.  

Nimbus is set to provide masks and sanitizers to frontliners to fight against COVID-19.

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**OTHER(S)**

**National News**

The Nepal Rastra Bank has instructed banks and financial institutions not to charge penalty or extra amount from customers during the period of prohibitory orders, and one month following that.

The Nepal Rastra Bank is set to announce relief and facilities to COVID-19 infected debtors.

The West Bengal government has banned the entry of people to India via Nepal’s Kakarbita border point after the Indian state government imposed a lockdown for two weeks starting on May 17.

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The land needed to set up holding centers to keep people returning from India via roads after a health test has been arranged, one month after the decision was made by the government. The original plan was to ready the holding centers and bring those into the operation by May 8. 84

Parliament members and the ministers themselves have lost faith that the government will make oxygen available in districts and save the citizens. There has been a competition between the ministers and parliamentarians to collect oxygen cylinders and send them to districts. As such valuable time is being wasted by carrying oxygen cylinders to the households of Parliament members rather than sending them directly to the districts. 85

It is the responsibility of the Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) to distribute oxygen cylinders, not of the parliament members. They should not ask for and distribute cylinders on their own. It’s their job to put the demand of the public forward, and related authorized agencies will do the job, according to Dr Jageshwar Gautam, Spokesperson at MoHP. 86

Healthcare materials have to be distributed on the basis of priority, not on the basis of someone’s access to power, according to leader of the Nepal Communist Party Maoist (center) Barsa Man Pun. He said it is an act of corruption to keep oxygen cylinders at homes of the leaders, parliament members and relatives of the ruling party. 87

The Health Office and Narayani Hospital Development Committee in Parsa have announced vacancies for a total of 66 staff, including doctors and other healthcare workers. 88

Minister for Education, Science and Technology Krishna Gopal Shrestha on May 14 highlighted the work done during his first stint listing appointments made in various universities and University Grants Commission, among others. His 20-point report is silent about whether the Ministry took any steps to ensure that school and college students participate in the teaching-learning process during the pandemic and examinations are held on time by adopting alternative methods. The way the Education
Ministry is working shows its leadership is least worried about the crisis the education sector is facing now, a Tribhuvan University professor said.  

It’s not possible for students of Jajarkot to study using alternative methods. There is no Internet, electricity and television in Nalgad Municipality-8 and students’ time is spent herding goats.

The government has banned Nepali citizens from flying abroad, but has allowed Indian citizens to fly to Saudi Arabia from Nepal and has approved 10 flights per week.

Citizens of the USA and other nations have started returning to their countries via their diplomatic agencies after cases of people dying due to the shortage of oxygen increased in Kathmandu.

There is no need for a health emergency at the moment, according to the leader of Nepali Congress Sher Bahadur Deuba.

International News

A new drug 2-DG has been developed in India for the treatment of COVID-19 patients. India has given approval for its emergency use.

India reported a further decline in new coronavirus cases on May 17, but daily deaths remained above 4,000 and experts said the data was unreliable due to lack of testing in rural areas where the virus is spreading fast.

The World Health Organization has requested rich countries to provide anti-COVID-19 vaccines to poor countries. At a time
when some nations are planning to vaccinate children as well, it has made the request to those countries to rethink the decision and give the vaccines to poor countries.  

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