



Focused COVID-19 Media Monitoring, Nepal



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-Sharpening the COVID-19 Response through Communications Intelligence

Date: September 13, 2021
Kathmandu, Nepal

EMERGING THEME(S)

- Nepal reported 838 new COVID-19 cases, 13 deaths on September 12; Delta variant detected in all 48 samples from Nepal sent to India for whole-genome sequencing; majority of households in Soru Rural Municipality, Mathilibru suffering from fever
- Though new infections have taken a dip in Nepal, test positivity rate continues to hover around 14 per cent; public health experts warn strict restrictions or lockdowns cannot be the answer to contain the spread of the infection; test for antibodies cannot confirm if one will get COVID-19 infection or not on the level of antibodies in one's body, says Director of National Public Health Laboratory Dr Runa Jha
- COVID-19 vaccination drive stopped in all 13 districts of Bagmati Province to protest appointment of a person from administrative section in the Provincial Health Ministry
- Budget for health sector increased by around 11,000,000,000, to be used to for the procurement of COVID-19 vaccines, additional 30,000,000 doses of vaccines to be bought: Finance Minister Janardhan Sharma
- Only 27.5 per cent of households in Nepal have used online classes, according to UNICEF study; guardians and teachers wary about reopening of schools in Kathmandu Valley, have requested schools be reopened only after Dashain; Kathmandu Metropolitan City readying for reopening of physical classes for school students from September 17, schools in Budhanilkantha, Makawanpur have reopened from September 12; Sindhuli, Jhapa schools have started reopening; schools in Chitwan to reopen from September 17

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.

ISSUE(S) IN FOCUS

Nepal's coronavirus caseload reached 777,163 on September 12 with 838 more people testing positive for the infection in the past 24 hours, while the countrywide COVID-19 mortality toll increased to 10,949 with 13 more fatalities. Nepal's COVID-19 recovery rate stands at 95.1 per cent, the fatality rate at 1.5 per cent, while the country's active COVID-19 case count currently is 26,757.²

The Delta variant of SARS-CoV-2 has been detected in all swab samples of the infected people that were sent for whole-genome sequencing. This is for the first time the super infectious variant of COVID-19 has been detected in 100 per cent swab samples, officials at the Ministry of Health and Population said. "Alpha and other variants were found in some swab samples of the infected people in the whole-genome sequencing test performed earlier," Dr Krishna Prasad Paudel, Spokesperson for MoHP, said. "But this time we found the Delta variant in all swab samples." The National Health Laboratory had collected 48 swab samples from the infected people, who were picked randomly between July 7 and August 20 in various parts of the country. The samples were sent for the whole-genome sequencing test to the World Health Organization's collaborating center, CSIR-Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology in India. "Now we can conclude that the second wave of the pandemic was caused by the Delta variant," said Dr Paudel. "A lot of people have already been infected with the variant in Nepal."³

The majority of households in Soru Rural Municipality have been suffering from fever since the last two weeks. The number of patients suffering from fever, headache, loss of appetite and body ache has been on the rise in Mathilibru. According to villagers, around 100 people are suffering from fever in Ward-4 alone. However, the local health post lacks the equipment, medicine and human resources to handle the overwhelming number of patients. The majority of patients are showing symptoms similar to that of COVID-19. Most of the people in Photu, Libru, Rawalbada, Narthapu, Jima of Soru and Tumcha village of Humla have fallen sick because of fever for the past few weeks.⁴

Seventeen months into the pandemic, COVID-19 has already killed over 10,900 people in Nepal, but authorities concerned continue to fail to apply science-guided measures or take the public into confidence. As new infections have taken a dip, so

² THT Online

³ The Kathmandu Post

⁴ The Kathmandu Post

has testing, but the Ministry of Health and Population continues to report 1,319 new infections on average each day and asserts that any complacency could quickly deteriorate the COVID-19 situation and all hard-won vaccination gains. But around a week since the government lifted all restrictions following the controversial preliminary findings of a second nationwide serological survey, authorities say they will reimpose strict restrictions if there's a surge in new infections. With the understanding of the nature of coronavirus and its mutations evolving on a daily basis, public health experts say restrictions or lockdowns cannot be the weapon to contain the spread of infections every time. A potential transmission at the community level, they say, may not come under control even with restrictions. "Next two to three weeks will be crucial to us as we have lifted all restrictions enforced to contain the spread of the virus," Dr Anup Subedee, an infectious disease expert said. "We have to see how the number of infections will change in the next two to three weeks." While the number of new infections has decreased of late, what worries experts like Subedee is that the test positivity rate continues to be around 14 per cent.⁵

The rate of COVID-19 infection has started to decline in Nepal. There are 27,000 active cases of COVID-19 in the country at present. There are more than 6,000 infected in Kathmandu Valley. Generally, health emergencies are imposed if the active cases are more than 500, but there are 14 districts with more than 500 active cases in the country — Kathmandu district has the highest rate of infection.⁶

The COVID-19 Crisis Management Center is set to sit for a meeting on September 12 to analyze the COVID-19 infection rate of Kathmandu Valley in recent days after the lifting of the prohibitory orders.⁷

The COVID-19 infection rate, which increased in the month of Shrawan (July-August), has started to decline in recent days in Chitwan. There used to be around 200 daily cases of infection in Shrawan, which has reduced to 40 cases per day now.⁸

The test for antibodies is not that important as it cannot be confirmed whether one will get COVID-19 infection or not on the basis of the level of antibodies in one's body, according to Dr Runa Jha, Director of National Public Health Laboratory. There is no basis to say how much antibodies will protect a person from the infection, she said.⁹

Out of 85 wards of Baglung, only two are in the red zone in terms of COVID-19 infection.¹⁰

⁵ The Kathmandu Post

⁶ Nayapatrika

⁷ Baahrakhari

⁸ Baahrakhari

⁹ Nayapatrika

The vaccination drive against COVID-19 has been stopped in all 13 districts of Bagmati Province as protest against the provision of appointing a secretary from the administrative section in the Provincial Health Ministry. The staff have staged a protest and demanded that the Ministry needs to be under the leadership of staff from the health sector.¹¹

A total of 23 per cent of the population have taken both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine in the Bagmati Province.¹²

Finance Minister Janardhan Sharma increased the budget by around Rs 11,000,000,000 in the health sector — it was revealed during the presentation of Nepal’s annual financial plan on September 10. He informed that the cost for procurement of vehicles, meeting allowances, training and expenses have been cut to add an additional budget of Rs 5,000,000,000 for the procurement of the COVID-19 vaccines. Along with the external resources, internal resources will also be mobilized for the procurement of the COVID-19 vaccines, he informed. The budget mentions that an additional 30,000,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines will be bought.¹³

A study done by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has found that only 27.5 per cent households have used online classes in Nepal. About 63 per cent children are dependent on self-study using their textbooks as the schools are shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the study has found.¹⁴

Most health experts, educationists and guardians have opposed the idea of reopening of schools immediately, but a meeting attended by Kathmandu’s Chief District Officer and local unit officials on September 6 decided to resume physical schooling from September 17. “We were okay with the existing online classes. How can a child follow health protocols — wear masks, sanitize continuously and maintain physical distance? For children that will be simply impossible,” said Nabin Khanal, a parent to a third-grader. On September 2, the Kathmandu Metropolitan City’s education board issued a circular to reopen schools. This had met with criticism and stakeholders had suspected the decision was guided by vested financial interests of private school operators. Maya Sris Rana, a teacher at a community school in Mahalaxmasthan, Lalitpur too is concerned about

¹⁰ Ratopati

¹¹ Baarhakhari

¹² Ratopati

¹³ Kantipur

¹⁴ Nayapatrika

children’s health in the event of the school’s failure to effectively enforce health protocols. “This is a big dilemma because many community schools like ours have not been able to run online classes for lack of online learning infrastructure, so such students would benefit from schools resumption. But at the same time there is a greater risk of virus transmission as enforcing health protocols in schools is a big challenge,” said Rana. Hundreds of parents in Kathmandu are apprehensive about sending their kids to school as the daily COVID-19 infections are still high, over 1,000. “Who will be responsible if children get infected, or die,” asks Khanal.¹⁵

The schools, students, guardians and the Department of Education have started preparations to reopen schools in Kathmandu district after the District Administration Office decided to allow their reopening from September 17. The Education Department of the Kathmandu Metropolitan City has started collecting information from the local levels as well as schools regarding the condition of the COVID-19 in their respective areas — the process to analyze the state of the infection, which has been made mandatory before reopening of the schools, has begun.¹⁶

It has been said that the schools of Kathmandu Valley can be reopened after taking approval from the District COVID-19 Crisis Management Center. The local levels have been holding discussions with guardians, schools and other stakeholders on how schools can be reopened. The students and guardians however are in a dilemma and they have requested that schools be reopened after Dashain, according to Mahendra Chhetri, Chief of the Education Department at the Lalitpur Metropolitan City. Nepal Guardians' Association has also said the schools should not be reopened immediately in the Valley.¹⁷

The schools of Budhanilkantha Municipality of Kathmandu have resumed physical classes from September 12.¹⁸

The educational institutions of Makawanpur, that had been shut down since the past four months, will reopen from September 12. According to the District COVID-19 Crisis Management Center, the majority of schools of all 10 local levels are reopening.¹⁹

¹⁵ The Kathmandu Post

¹⁶ Nagarik

¹⁷ Onlinekhabar

¹⁸ Setopati

The schools of Sindhuli, that had been shut down with the spread of the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic, have started reopening. Out of the nine local levels of the district, in-person classes have resumed in Kamalamai and Dudhauri municipalities, as well as in Marin, Hariharpurgadhi, Golanjor and Fikkal rural municipalities.²⁰

Some local levels of Jhapa have resumed in-person classes as all students do not have access to the online classes. The Gauriganj, Kachankawal rural municipalities and Shivsatachi Municipality have started physical classes partially.²¹

Preparations are being made to reopen community and private schools of Chitwan from September 17. The schools will conduct in-person classes adhering to the public health protocols, according to the District Crisis Management Center.²²

OTHER(S)

National News

The World Health Organization (WHO) and member countries, including Nepal, of WHO South-East Asia Region on September 9 discussed strengthening the health emergency security systems to effectively respond to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for future health emergencies. “The COVID-19 pandemic has posed myriad challenges at an unprecedented level. Globally, no country was prepared enough to deal with an emergency of this scale. It is critical that lessons learned from the ongoing pandemic are utilized to inform our efforts to strengthen health security systems,”

¹⁹ Onlinekhabar

²⁰ Kantipur

²¹ Nayapatrika

²² Onlinekhabar

said Dr Poonam Khetrpal Singh, Regional Director of WHO South-East Asia, at the 74th Regional Committee meeting hosted by Nepal virtually.²³

The World Health Organization has urged member countries including Nepal in South-East Asia Region to accelerate efforts to control non-communicable diseases which account for two-thirds of all deaths in the region while also increasing the risk of severe COVID-19.²⁴

The government data has shown that the number of people committing suicide has increased due to COVID-19 infection in Nepal. A total of 7,117 people committed suicide in the last fiscal year, while it was 6,241 in the previous year.²⁵

The cases of suicidal attempts have been rising in the country every year. A total of 7,171 people tried to commit suicide in the last fiscal year in Nepal. Though the rate of such attempts is found to be increasing across the world every year, the attempts have increased more after the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁶

The Province 2 government has started preparations to launch the campaign 'No Mask No Service'. The campaign is being introduced in the government offices as there has been carelessness regarding the use of masks in recent days.²⁷

A slow recovery in tourism is expected to leave many Nepalis jobless this year as well as the government leadership and policymakers, who are wholly responsible for a revival plan, appear to be busy playing politics, paying little attention to initiate measures to attract international visitors, industry insiders say. Travel and tourism businesses, which accounted for around 8 per cent of the nation's gross domestic product in pre-COVID-19 times, have been hardest hit since early 2020 due to travel restrictions.²⁸

Dr Suneel Budhathoki of the Karnali Academy of Health Sciences has been deployed for testing and treating of the COVID-19 patients and making the locals aware about the infection in different places of Jumla since the beginning of the

²³ The Himalayan Times

²⁴ The Himalayan Times

²⁵ Nagarik

²⁶ Annapurna Post

²⁷ Baarhakhari

²⁸ The Kathmandu Post

pandemic. He has been deployed in high risk places too, and his dedication to work paid off as he is loved by the people in all the places he has worked.²⁹

Bidya Sundar Shakya, Mayor of Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC), has requested the public to celebrate the Indra Jatra festival adhering to the public health protocols. He also informed that KMC has arranged for COVID-19 vaccine for 300 people upon the request of the Indra Jatra Management Committee.³⁰

Hindu women celebrated Haritalika Teej with much religious fervor amid the fear of COVID-19 pandemic. Tens of thousands of fasting women could not visit the core area of Pashupatinath Temple as the Pashupati Area Development Trust kept its door shut to devotees to avoid jostling crowds of people in the most revered Hindu shrine citing the threat of the ongoing pandemic situation. Irrespective of the temple's closure, hundreds of devotees offered prayers from outside the entrance of the shrine. However, many Shiva temples in different parts of Kathmandu Valley were open to devotees.³¹

The locals have decided not to allow the reopening of Muktinath Temple immediately as the agreement made by the authorities during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic have not been met yet. In the written agreement made between the locals and the local levels among others, it was mentioned that any person needing emergency health services due to the COVID-19 infection had to be rescued free of cost, and the Muktinath Development Committee was supposed to provide needed resources for the treatment of the critically-ill COVID-19 infected locals. However, as none of the agreements have been fulfilled, the locals have stopped the temple's reopening for now.³²

The Pratima Nima Academy has provided healthcare materials worth Rs 10,000,000 to battle against COVID-19 to the Bagmati Province Ministry of Health.³³

The Department of Roads is making preparations to extend around 2,000 contracts related to road and bridge projects whose

²⁹ Nagarik

³⁰ Baarhakhari

³¹ The Himalayan Times

³² Annapurna Post

³³ Kantipur

works were affected or stalled by several months of lockdown and prohibitory orders, until mid-April next year. The contracts of these projects were signed last year before and between the two COVID-19 lockdowns.³⁴

International News

Several hundred people line up every morning, starting before dawn, on a grassy area outside Nairobi's largest hospital hoping to get the COVID-19 vaccine. Sometimes the line moves smoothly, while on other days, the staff tells them there's nothing available, and they should come back the next day. Halfway around the world, at a church in Atlanta, two workers with plenty of vaccine doses waited hours on September 8 for anyone to show up, whiling away the time by listening to music from a laptop. Over a six-hour period, only one person came through the door. The dramatic contrast highlights the vast disparity around the world. In richer countries, people can often pick and choose from multiple available vaccines, walk into a site near their homes and get a shot in minutes. Pop-up clinics, such as the one in Atlanta, bring vaccines into rural areas and urban neighborhoods, but it is common for them to get very few takers. In the developing world, supply is limited and uncertain. Just over 3 per cent of people across Africa have been fully vaccinated, and health officials and citizens often have little idea what will be available from one day to the next. The disparity comes as the US is moving closer to offering booster shots to large segment of the population even as it struggles to persuade Americans to get vaccinated in the first place.³⁵

The Hong Kong government has agreed to allow vaccinated Hong Kong ID card holding Nepali expats stranded in Nepal to return to Hong Kong. Previously Hong Kong had denied entry to its citizens despite being vaccinated in Nepal. Hong Kong had halted its regular flights to Nepal since May, and enlisted Nepal among the extremely risky nations with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁶

The United Arab Emirates said on September 10 that residents who had been fully vaccinated with a shot approved by the World Health Organization could return as of September 12 from a list of previously suspended countries. Countries from

³⁴ The Kathmandu Post

³⁵ The Associated Press (in The Kathmandu Post)

³⁶ Rastriya Samachar Samiti (in The Himalayan Times)

which residents can fly into the UAE from September 12 are Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Namibia, Zambia, among others.³⁷

The summer that was supposed to mark America's independence from COVID-19 is instead drawing to a close with the US more firmly under the tyranny of the virus, with deaths per day back up to where they were in March. The Delta variant is filling hospitals, sickening alarming numbers of children and driving coronavirus deaths in some places to the highest levels of the entire pandemic. School systems that reopened their classrooms are abruptly switching back to remote learning because of outbreaks. Legal disputes, threats and violence have erupted over mask and vaccine requirements. The US death toll stands at more than 650,000 with one major forecast model projecting it will top 750,000 by December 1.³⁸

Thailand plans to reopen Bangkok and other key destinations — Hua Hin, Pattaya and Chiang Mai — to foreign tourists next month, officials said on September 9 aiming to revive its battered travel industry after indications the number of new coronavirus infections may have peaked. Fully vaccinated visitors who commit to a series of tests can enter the said cities under certain criteria. The scheme is underway on the islands of Samui and Phuket.³⁹

Sylvia Burberry is delighted that she no longer spends most of her life traveling for work. Her sentiments are echoed by workers around the world who are tired of the grind of corporate travel. This is bad news for the airlines, hotels and conference centers that rely on this lucrative business.⁴⁰

³⁷ Reuters (in The Himalayan Times)

³⁸ The Associated Press (in The Kathmandu Post)

³⁹ Reuters (in The Kathmandu Post)

⁴⁰ Reuters (in The Kathmandu Post)

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WHO's COVID-19 response in Nepal is made possible through the generous support of the Government of Azerbaijan, the Government of Canada, UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO), Government of Germany, and USAID.

Reference Code: 21SEPT13MM_027