

Nepal: Masses confront enormous hardships from coronavirus pandemic

By Rohantha De Silva
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Nepal's ongoing COVID-19 lockdown is creating serious problems for the country's population. After much hesitation and concern about its impact on the tourist industry, the Stalinist Communist Party (NCP) government on March 25 imposed a national lockdown.

Prime Minister Sharma Oli's government, however, has made no serious effort to ensure that the country's overwhelmingly poor population will be provided with daily essentials, medicine and health safety equipment.

Last Saturday, *nep123.com* reported that many impoverished people and daily wage earners, including those in the quarrying and construction industries, are trapped in their homes and starving in Tanahun, one of 77 districts in the country.

Thousands of daily wage workers, street vendors and poor people from different parts of Nepal are also stranded in Kathmandu, the country's capital, because transport services have been halted.

Concerned about rising social discontent, senior establishment figures, including former chief justices Kalyan Shrestha and Sushila Karki, on March 26 publicly called on the government to provide special relief for its most needy citizens.

Three days later, on March 29, the Oli government announced various relief measures, including a 25 percent discount on electricity for consumers who use up to 150 units every month and a 10 percent discount on rice, flour, dhal, salt and sugar for daily wage workers who are not being paid. Daily wage workers who are not receiving any income, however, are unable to pay even these discounted prices.

The Kathmandu Metropolitan City has announced 100 million rupees (\$US830,000) for prevention and control for COVID-19 but for the 6.5 million people living in the national capital and its metro area this is a

pittance. It will do nothing to overcome the country's seriously understaffed and under-equipped health infrastructure.

The Nepali masses have been told to wear face masks, regularly wash their hands with soap, use sanitisers, avoid crowds and observe social-distancing. The poorest sections of society, however, cannot afford such products, let alone live in areas where social-distancing is possible.

As veteran physician Mani Dixit explained to the *Kathmandu Post* on March 22: "Sanitisers are becoming a privilege that even those from the middle class are finding hard to access. These protective resources are becoming more expensive and scarce by the day."

According to the International Labour Organisation, about 62.2 percent of Nepal's workforce is employed in the informal sector, including street vendors, garbage collectors, cleaners, rickshaw pullers and domestic helpers. These workers are not able to get access to basic virus protection materials, let alone increasingly expensive daily essentials.

According to media reports, the price of vegetables tripled in the first week of the lockdown and they are now becoming scarce. Although the government has allowed vehicles to transport vegetables during the lockdown, the drivers and their work assistants are not provided with face masks or sanitisers. Confronted with these unsafe conditions, farmers and traders are reluctant to exchange their products.

On March 27, Federation of Fruits and Vegetable Entrepreneurs president Khom Prasad Ghimire said: "Demand for fruit, vegetables and milk has declined because they are perishable items and people cannot store such food items for more than two or three days."

Transportation of milk from villages to the cities is

being restricted and in remote areas milk collection has been halted. Poultry farmers have also been hit by the lack of animal feed and their businesses are now at risk. Among the worst affected are daily wage agricultural workers, particularly in Tarai, Nepal's main agricultural region.

While only five COVID-19 cases have been officially confirmed in Nepal so far, the real figure is no doubt higher because mass testing is not being carried out.

“The impacts are already visible,” Jeevan Baniya, assistant director of the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility at Social Science Baha told the *Kathmandu Post* on March 21.

“Some employers have already started laying off employees whereas others have asked them to stay on unpaid leave for some time. The effects are likely to worsen in the coming days, as often happens during times of shocks and disasters,” he said.

More than one million foreign visitors travel to Nepal each year, including mountaineers, trekkers and others drawn to its spectacular mountain scenery, including Mount Everest and seven of the other 10 highest mountains in the world. The land-locked country's cool weather and ancient Hindu and Buddhist historic sites and cultural heritage are strong attractions.

Tourism is Nepal's largest source of foreign exchange, generating up to \$US500 million annually. The industry provides jobs for an estimated 1.5 million workers in the hotel, airline, transportation, accommodation, restaurant and leisure industry sectors. In 2017, the travel and tourism sector comprised 7.8 percent of the country's gross domestic product.

The national lockdown and fear of the virus has thrown the tourism industry into free fall. Around 20,000 workers in tour, trekking and mounting guide employment are predicted to lose their jobs. The estimated one million residents living in the country's mountain belt, who depend on the spending of foreign trekkers and mountaineers, are being severely impacted.

The hardest-hit is the Mount Everest tourist sector, which relies completely on the spring mountaineering season to provide jobs for climbing guides, porters and hotel and lodge workers, has collapsed.

All this is drastically worsening Nepal's already high levels of poverty. Nepal is amongst the world's poorest countries, ranking 148 out of 189, with around 25

percent of the population below the official poverty line and living on less than 35 rupees per day.

Around five million people are undernourished with the country recording some of the highest child mortality and disease rates on the planet. Forty-eight percent of pregnant women in Nepal are anaemic.

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