

Update-3

Management of Nepali Migrants Returning from India during the Lockdown

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In the third week of March 2020, both Nepal and India went into lockdown in order to control and prevent the spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19). However, travel restrictions were recently eased in India and Nepali migrants have started returning home. As a result, the number of migrants entering Nepal is high, with border districts of Province 5 and Sudurpashchim Province seeing the highest numbers of Nepali migrants. The federal government has designated 20 border check-posts for Nepali migrants entering the country from India.¹ District administration offices of border districts have been facilitating the return of Nepali migrants stuck at the Indo-Nepal border since the lockdown was enforced. Along with the federal and provincial governments, various civil society organizations have taken on a diverse set of roles to facilitate the return of migrants to their homes. The high incidence of infection across India has made it necessary to adopt extra caution to ensure that migrants returning from infected areas do not spread the virus further in Nepal. While district administration offices of border districts have overseen the entry and safe transport of migrants to their local units, local governments have undertaken the responsibility of keeping them under quarantine. Yet, the failure on the part of the federal, provincial and local governments to imagine that Nepali migrants would be returning home in such large numbers has resulted in complications in safely managing them. This update discusses the various challenges faced and efforts made to manage the volume of migrants returning from India.

¹ The 20 check-posts as designated by Government of Nepal are: Pashupatinagar, Kakarbhitta, Rani, Kunauli, Thadi, Madar, Bhattamod, Malangawa, Gaur, Birgunj, Maheshpur, Belahiya, Taulihawa, Krishnanagar, Jamunaha, Surajpur, Gauriphanta, Gaddachauki, Jhulaghat and Darchula. <https://ekantipur.com/news/2020/05/29/159075538069985496.html>

1. Thousands of Nepali migrants returning everyday:

Nepali migrants have been entering the country in large numbers daily. The flow is significantly higher through check-posts at Gaddachauki in Kanchanpur and Gauriphanta in Kailali of Sudurpashchim Province, and Jamunaha in Banke and Sunauli Belahiya in Rupandehi of Province 5. District administration offices in Kanchanpur and Parsa districts have been recording the details of Nepali migrants entering Nepal through their districts since the last week of May.² Although statistics about the number of Nepali citizens entering through check-posts in Kapilvastu district have not yet been made public, these statistics were provided by the Armed Police Force (APF) in the district. Therefore, the number of migrants entering through check-posts in these districts is known. But, similar statistics from other districts are not public. As a result, it is not possible to determine the exact number of all migrants who have entered Nepal.

Although Nepali migrants were already arriving by May 25, district administration office in Kanchanpur formally opened the Gaddachauki check-post on May 27. Every citizen entering through the check-post was mandatorily required to fill in a form disclosing personal details. Till June 2, a total of 14,190 migrants from more than 40 districts entered through the check-post. The majority of them were from districts in Sudurpashchim Province. Between May 27 and May 30, a total of 624 migrants who had been stuck on the India side because of the lockdown entered through the Raxaul check-post in Parsa district. On May 27 alone, which was the first day when those stuck on the India side had been allowed to enter Nepal, 559 Nepalis from 29 districts entered Nepal through the Raxaul check-post. A total of 19,025 Nepalis from 26 districts entered through Kapilvastu district from May 14 to May 30.

On four separate occasions between May 18 and May 30, a total of 1,432 Nepali migrants entered Nepal

² These district administration offices have maintained the daily statistics of Nepali migrants entering to Nepal on their websites.

through the Jhulaghat check-post in Baitadi district. Since May 24, between 4,500 and 5,000 migrants have been entering Nepal everyday through the Gauriphanta check-post in Kailali, between 2,000 and 2,500 through the Jamunaha check-post in Banke, and between 500 and 1,000 through the Belahiya check-post in Rupandehi according to the assistant chief district officers of the respective districts. Similarly, about 250 and 300 Nepalis have been entering through Kakarbhitta in Jhapa district daily. The APF deployed at the check-post has been keeping a record of their details.

2. Management of migrants who have entered Nepal:

In coordination with district administration offices on border areas, local governments have been sequestering migrants in their own quarantine facilities and administering COVID-19 tests. As far as possible, district administration offices have been arranging for transportation to take them to their destinations within the day of their arrival. When the number of migrants entering Nepal was low, migrants were being given Rapid Diagnostic Test (RDT) or Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) tests in border districts, and then sent on to their destination district after ensuring that they did not carry the virus. For instance, migrants entering through Kanchanpur district were swabbed and tested in the district itself, and in Jhapa, migrants were being held for a few days to administer RDT tests before being sent to their destinations. But in the past week, the number of migrants entering the country has overwhelmed the number of test kits available, therefore migrants are being sent to their respective local units without being tested. Even though these migrants have been staying at quarantine facilities established by their local governments, the fact that inadequate caution was exercised while letting them into the country suggests that there is a higher risk of the infection spreading. The chairperson of Pancheshwor Rural Municipality in Baitadi says, "People have entered mostly through Kailali, which is also the headquarters of the province. If the provincial

government had sent people onward (to destination local units) only after administering the RDT, it would have helped us a lot. But, because they just crammed people into buses and sent them on, the chances of the infection spreading has increased."

Some local governments have arranged for vehicles to transport migrants who have entered Nepal to their local units or the respective district headquarters. Tilottama Municipality of Rupandehi received migrants who had arrived at the Sunauli Belahiya border to ferry them to their municipality and kept them under quarantine. Ajaymeru Rural Municipality of Dadeldhura had arranged buses and paid one way transportation cost for migrants from Gauriphanta check-post, Dhangadhi to Dadeldhura district headquarter. Provincial governments also arranged for vehicles to transport migrants to their respective districts. Provincial and local governments have made such services available only to migrants with limited monetary means or lacking such means. Therefore, most Nepali migrants have borne the cost of transportation within Nepal out of their own pockets. However, local governments have arranged for cost-free transportation from district headquarters to the destination local units or wards.

The assistant chief district officer of Kanchanpur said that every Nepali was given a mask and a bottle of water upon entering Nepal and a packet of food upon boarding a bus. Similarly, at the Gauriphanta check-post in Kailali, with the assistance of the Sudurpashchim Province government and under the management of the Sudurpashchim Foundation, more than 2,000 migrants entering Nepal daily since May 24 have been provided a meal, yoghurt and water. Additionally, various organizations in Dhangadhi and local traders have also been arranging food for migrants entering Nepal.

Although the federal government has decided to open borders, due to the fact that India's West Bengal government has still enforced a strict lockdown, Nepalis returning from India are congregating under the newly built Asian Highway Bridge, where the APF records their personal details. From there, they are

put on vehicles and sent to their destination districts. But migrants who are residents of Province 1 are kept under quarantine in Jhapa itself. Since May 18, a total of 1,850 migrants, besides those of Province 1, have been sent to destination districts from Jhapa. According to the chairperson of Jhapa District Coordination Committee, about 1,000 individuals of Province 1 and Kathmandu Valley are being kept under quarantine at various facilities there. Of them, about 400 individuals are from various districts in Province 1. In coordination with the Province 1 government, migrants from the province are released only after their PCR tests returns negative, and migrants from the Kathmandu Valley are transported only after being administered the RDT tests to ensure that they are not carrying the virus.

3. Quarantine operation and management after the influx:

Quarantine facilities everywhere have proven inadequate because migrants are returning in numbers defying the expectations of local governments. To accommodate the rapid influx of Nepali migrants many quarantine facilities which were built in a rush do not match the required standards.³ Local governments had prepared data about migrants from their local units living in India and other countries by mobilizing the ward and local government offices, employees, settlement committees, and women volunteers. For instance, Ajayameru Rural Municipality in Dadeldhura and Budhinanda Municipality in Bajura have collected data indicating that they have 1,159 and 1,800 residents of the municipality living in India respectively. 5,000 residents from Pancheshwor Rural Municipality of Baitadi are in India, while about 3,500 of the 5,981 residents from Achham living outside the district are in India. Similarly, Yashodhara Rural Municipality and Tillottama Municipality of Province 5 estimate

that 2,000 and 2,900 respectively of their residents are in India.

Local governments had established quarantine facilities with only a few beds, anticipating that their residents would not all return at once in such large numbers. However, when transportation services resumed in India, migrants began forming large groups to return home. Following this, local governments were under pressure to add new quarantine facilities overnight. Pancheshwor Rural Municipality, Buddhabhumi Municipality, Yashodhara Rural Municipality and Kachankawal Rural Municipality added quarantine facilities when the number of migrants began to increase. Kachankawal Rural Municipality in Jhapa, which had estimated that 4,000 of its residents were in India, had initially built a 25-bed quarantine facility in a school. But when migrants returned suddenly from India, even quarantine facilities established across six schools have proved insufficient. Nearly 400 migrants were being kept under quarantine there, and 52 out of 99 migrants at a quarantine center tested positive for COVID-19. By May 19, Kachankawal Rural Municipality had registered 100 infections. “We had never imagined that we would have to cater to such a large number of people,” the chairperson of Kachankawal Rural Municipality said. Buddhabhumi Municipality faced a similar situation. The municipality had been operating a town-level quarantine facility out of a school. When the number of migrants returning from India increased, along with the increase in the number of people under quarantine, four cases of COVID-19 infections were identified. After that, quarantine facilities were built in each ward. In Baitadi district, every local government was directed to establish quarantine facilities to accommodate about 100 individuals. When the number of migrants entering the district became very high, each local government was directed to increase its quarantine facility by an additional 100 beds. According to a member of the District Disaster Management Center, the quarantine facilities added later do not meet the necessary physical requirements. Pancheshwor Rural Municipality, which is managing quarantine facilities for 700 migrants who have returned from India, is

³ The first Covid-19 update by DRCN had discussed the instances where some local governments had tried to build and manage woman-friendly quarantines and according to the Standards. https://www.democracyresource.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/DRCN_Covid-Update_1_24Apr20_Final.pdf

operating quarantine facilities not only in schools but also in a birthing center. An additional 700 migrants seeking to return from India have come in contact with the local government. The Rural Municipality chairperson said, “We have no other alternative left but to keep people under tarps on fallow land. We are concerned about how we will provide drinking water and sanitary facilities.” Since the upsurge in the number of migrants arriving at quarantine facilities, most local governments have provided food and vegetables, but asked the residents to bring their own beddings and cooking utensils. Migrants staying under quarantine have been asked to form committees among themselves to collect firewood, cook and clean.

Elected local representatives are increasingly upset at the federal and provincial governments for shifting all of the responsibilities of establishing and operating quarantine facilities for migrants to the local level while failing to extend any assistance. An employee of Yashodhara Rural Municipality, arguing that the federal and provincial government should assist local units which lack the resources to establish and manage quarantine facilities on their own, said, “We are operating quarantine facilities in every ward. Not a single school in any ward is empty -- they have been made into quarantine facilities, but only in name. There is nothing. People staying there are getting food from their homes. Local governments and wards have kept themselves as guarantors to hotels and traders to arrange for tents and food material. But it does not seem the federal or the provincial government cares at all.”

4. Safety of migrants in quarantine facilities:

As the number of people under quarantine continues to increase, the physical safety and health risk for people also appears to be increasing. Sufficient attention has not gone towards the safety and nutrition of women, children and the elderly in quarantines. Elected representatives accepted that they had failed to provide adequate supervision through security personnel. According to representatives of security forces, it is not feasible to provide security personnel

in adequate numbers because there are not enough security personnel in the districts themselves. Additionally, as security personnel themselves begin to get infected, there is a growing deficiency of personnel. An assistant chief district officer pointed to the lack of security personnel and said, “We have been asking both the federal and the provincial government for additional personnel, but have not received any. If we had a team of 20 to 25 additional security personnel, we could deploy them to quarantine facilities.” In the absence of an adequate number of police personnel, Budhinanda Rural Municipality has been mobilizing two volunteers per quarantine facility for security. But elected representatives at the local unit themselves are doubtful of the efficacy of such arrangements.

The security of women and children at quarantine facilities has become increasingly challenging. Most quarantines are not woman-friendly. In order to solve this problem, Dhangadhi Sub-Metropolitan City had established a woman-friendly quarantine. Even though woman security personnel were arranged for during the day, male security personnel had to be assigned during the night, which made women in quarantine uncomfortable.⁴ There is also a lack of nutritious food for infants and mothers with infants. The deputy chairperson of Ramaroshan Rural Municipality said, “women, especially expectant mothers, along with young children have been most affected due to the lack of nutritious food.” According to her, there were two pregnant women and many children under the age of five staying under quarantine. On the other hand, once the birthing center was converted into a quarantine facility, expectant mothers have had to be taken to a distant hospital to give birth.

5. Testing facilities and material supply:

An extreme shortage of testing material has forced people to stay under quarantine for far longer than necessary, which has exacerbated the challenges in managing quarantine facilities. In Baitadi, where

⁴ <https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/afraid-of-men-more-than-the-virus/>

more than 4,000 people are staying at quarantine facilities, the provincial government made only 3,600 test kits available against a request for 5,000 test kits. Chairperson of a rural municipality, explaining that it has not been possible to send individuals to their home villages owing to a lack of test kits, said, “There are people here who have spent more than 12 days in quarantine. If we had test kits, we could have administered the test and sent them home if they showed a negative result. But how can we send them home without testing? And if we do not send them home, how do we mitigate the added pressure upon quarantine management?”

The chairperson of Kachankawal Rural Municipality said that they had purchased 500 Viral Transport Mediums (VTM) on their own to expedite testing. Similarly, Budhinanda Rural Municipality has also begun proceedings for a similar procurement. Although suppliers of RDT and VTMs had approached some local governments, the lack of ability to ascertain the quality of material offered had hampered the procurement process. Local governments lack the skilled human resources required to test the quality of test kits. The chairperson of Ajaymeru Rural Municipality said that they were hesitant to purchase testing material because they were skeptical about the quality of materials. It is important for the federal and provincial governments to pay attention to this issue.

On the other hand, although provinces have passed relevant decisions, the establishment of testing labs has taken a long time. Because of the limited number of laboratories available, even if specimen swabs are collected, it takes a long time to get the results. There is a high risk of the infection spreading during that wait. According to the chairperson of Kachankawal Rural Municipality, results for collected swabs are returned only after three days at a minimum.

6. Cooperation among three levels of government:

As the number of Nepali migrants entering from India has increased, the number of infected people has also

gone up. The federal and provincial governments have left all responsibility for managing quarantines to local governments. Local governments have already spent a large amount toward relief distribution, procurement of health material, establishing and managing quarantines, establishing isolation wards, stipends to health workers, etc. According to some local governments they have spent upwards of NPR 10 million. However, revenue collection has not been as projected due to the enforced lockdown. Due to which, local elected representatives insist it has been difficult for them to build and manage quarantine facilities to accommodate the large influx of migrants. The federal government has instructed local levels to manage their expenditure by reallocating the equalization grant given by the federal government. However, the chairperson of the National Association of Rural Municipality in Nepal is of the opinion that it should have been made possible for local governments to spend the conditional grants which have remained unused rather than asking them to spend the equalization grant.⁵ He said, “According to Schedule 5 of the Constitution of Nepal the federal government is responsible for mitigating the risk of infectious disease. The other levels of government have an assisting function. But the local level has assisted the federal government by taking on more than 80 percent of the responsibilities in the prevention and control of COVID-19. Most local units did not have a large budget. So many local governments have reallocated budgets from other unspent headings. Many others have promised to pay for expenditures next year and decided to currently spend for the purpose of prevention and control. The federal government does not need to direct us to spend the equalization grants – we already have the right to decide where to spend it. It should be directing us to reallocate the conditional grants. But it would not come out and say so.”

⁵ Equalization grants are spent at the discretion of local governments, while conditional grants are earmarked for programs made by the federal government.

Conclusion

Nepali migrants living in various cities in India are entering Nepal in large numbers through various check-posts along the Indo-Nepal border. Local governments had not expected such a large surge in the number of Nepali citizens returning from India, and thus were not fully prepared. District administration offices of border districts, provincial governments and local governments have arranged for the transportation of citizens entering into Nepal to be taken to their destination local units, without administering necessary tests. But local governments are facing enormous challenges in providing and managing safe quarantine facilities for such returnees. As more people than anticipated by local governments have arrived all at once, the financial, physical and human resources available to local governments have proven to be woefully inadequate. Letting a large number of citizens travel onward without any testing at border check-

posts, and then upon arrival at their destination local units, keeping them crammed in crowded quarantine facilities has increased the risk of spreading COVID-19 infections. A lack of testing materials has resulted in very slow testing of citizens staying under quarantine. The federal and provincial governments must facilitate the supply of testing material to the local level, but they must also immediately increase the number and capacity of available testing laboratories. Even if tests are administered, it takes a long time to get the results back. This has not only exacerbated problems around quarantine management but also increased the probability of infections further spreading. The federal and provincial governments must without delay take upon the responsibility of quarantine management. If the entire responsibility of managing citizens staying in quarantine facilities after returning from India is left to local units alone and if testing continues to happen at the present sluggish rate, the infection may spread at an uncontrollable rate.



Telephone interviews with officials at the district administration offices of Baitadi, Kanchanpur and Kailali districts of Sudurpashchim Province; Banke, Rupandehi and Kapilvastu districts in Province 5; Parsa and Rautahat in Province 2 and Jhapa in Province 1 were conducted to prepare this report. Similarly, local elected representatives and officials, security personnel, journalists and other stakeholders of Pancheswor Rural Municipality of Baitadi, Budhinanda Municipality of Bajura, Ramaroshan Rural Municipality of Achham, Ajaymeru Rural Municipality of Dadeldhura, Yasodhara Rural Municipality and Buddhabhumi Municipality of Kapilvastu, Tilottama Municipality of Rupandehi, Patrewa Sugauli Rural Municipality of Parsa, Dewahi Gonahi Municipality of Rautahat, Kachankawal Rural Municipality of Jhapa were interviewed through telephone. The Asia Foundation provided financial and technical support for this study. All conclusions and analyses in this report are based on Democracy Resource Center Nepal (DRCN)'s study and may not necessarily represent the opinions of the supporting institution.