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## **Latest COVID-19 Situation Report from Nepal & Recent Press Highlights, Nov-Jan, 2022**

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- The Ministry of Health and Population in late November had sent some 750 samples for gene sequencing to the UK to find out whether the new omicron variant of the coronavirus had entered Nepal.
- Less than a month after India started getting affected by the suspected omicron strain of COVID-19, the variant is currently spreading like wildfire in neighbouring Nepal.
- The COVID-19 spread in India also resulted in mass return of migrant workers across the porous border to Nepal, and a lack of effective border testing and quarantine procedures have also greatly contributed towards the spread of COVID-19 in Nepal.
- Nepal is currently reporting a daily rise of approximately 10,000+ new COVID-19 infections, highest figures since onset of pandemic in March 2020. The majority of this is concentrated in the capital Kathmandu. It is also worth noting the current local trend shows that a lot of symptomatic people are not testing themselves and therefore, the real figure for positive cases would be much higher.
- 14 districts have over 500 active COVID-19 cases as of January and WHO Nepal has reported that COVID-19 infection is being seen massively amongst children. The risk of infection is more in children below the age of 12, ineligible for the vaccine.
- Latest COVID-19 infection rate is reported to be higher than 50%, the highest average infection rates the country has recorded till now and five times higher in comparison to earlier waves. Health Ministry projects COVID-19 infection will peak on the last week of January with highest number of infections being recorded between 22-29 January.
- Superspreader political events and mass gatherings from November through to December 2021 increased risk of further transmission which have contributed to the exponential rise in recent COVID-19 cases.
- With the surge in cases, the Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP) of the Government of Nepal has come up with a COVID-19 Health Sector Rapid Action

Plan (November – February 2021), and different federal ministries, provincial governments and local governments are working together to ensure that response plans are in place to mitigate the impacts of the latest spike in COVID-19 cases.

- Although there was a good mix of both Delta and Omicron variants in December 2021, the latest gene sequencing report from the Ministry of Health and Population indicated that 88% of the recent cases as of January 2022 is Omicron.
- However, while case numbers have risen exponentially, hospitalisations are not reported to have increased at the same rate, and are definitely lower than that during the first two Delta waves, thanks to a good vaccination coverage. According to MoH Dr Manisha Rawal, the number of critically ill COVID-19 patients admitted in hospitals is four times less currently, in comparison to the second wave. WHO reported that over 90% of COVID-19-infected are in home isolation. Having said that, the Omicron variant remains a great concern for the unvaccinated.
- Whilst the first and second waves of COVID-19 Delta variant resulted in shortage of hospital ICU beds and oxygen supplies, Omicron so far is causing a significant shortage of health workers who are continuing to get infected across Nepal's hospitals, and especially so in Kathmandu:
- There is acute and chronic shortage in medical staff across Nepal due to the rapid spread of Omicron, which has prompted the Ministry of Health and Population to consider shortening the isolation period for doctors, nurses and paramedics to five days in a similar fashion to rules in the USA and India.
- With more and more healthcare personnel testing positive for COVID-19, health system coming under tremendous pressure, public health experts say human resources is proving to be the major problem in the third wave; Operation Theatre of Koshi Hospital in Biratnagar has been shut down after 76 staff members of the hospital tested positive; Sudurpashchim hospitals are feeling pressure of both seasonal flu and COVID-19 patients as mercury drops; Bagmati Provincial government to deploy 300 nurses for the treatment and care of COVID-19 patients. Even major health facilities such as Teaching Hospital (TUTH), BIR Hospital and Sukraraj Tropical and Infectious Disease Hospitals in Kathmandu are finding it increasingly challenging to cope with medics getting infected. At the latter, there are so many health workers infected by COVID-19 that they have had to postpone the vaccination drive by a week due to short staffing.
- At the district level, human resource capacity to operate ventilators and provide ICU case management is a critical challenge and of the utmost importance to address in order to effectively respond to severe COVID-19 cases across the country.
- Given Nepal's largely unprepared and limited healthcare infrastructure which works on a shift basis, medical staff having to isolate even just a few days is seriously disrupting medical care in Kathmandu and especially in rural areas where hospitals and doctors were always few and far between.
- Cost of PCR Test has been reduced to Rs 800 for asymptomatic people, where as those showing symptoms can get the test done for free in government centres. Private

testing facilities have also reduced costs per test to Rs 1500 from an earlier charge of Rs 2000.

- The booster dose for frontliners only began on January 16th, and the rapid rise in cases have resulted in poorly organised vaccination drives, requiring medical workers to queue up for hours and also return on another day depending on the daily vaccine stock levels of the centre. According to the Ministry of Health and Population, the booster dose will also be provided to all senior citizens aged above 60 years as well as those who have completed six months of the full dose vaccine from January 28th onwards.
- Despite having around 13 million vaccine doses in stock (as of the first week of January 2022), authorities failed to boost the overall vaccine drive, despite relatively low levels of general COVID-19 vaccination hesitancy in Nepal.
- The vaccination drive against COVID-19 has been affected due to a lack of syringes required to administer the vaccine in Nepal. The government has ample stock of the vaccine which have been delivered across Nepal, but there is a critical shortage of around syringes to administer them.
- Students are being given the vaccine against COVID-19 in their respective schools. The schools are closed for winter vacation amidst the third wave of COVID-19 pandemic till 29 January, and the children aged 12 to 17 of this age group are being administered the vaccine during the vacation.
- As of December 2021, Nepal has received over 31 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines from various sources.
- As of December 2021, 58.4% of the population above 18 years have been administered at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine and 47% have been fully vaccinated (United Nations Nepal).
- Lab tests have shown that the AstraZeneca and VeroCell vaccines most used in Nepal may not be so effective against Omicron, and only m-RNA vaccines like Pfizer and Moderna may be effective as boosters to stop infections. However, researchers have said all vaccines, including AstraZeneca and the Chinese jabs, significantly protect against serious illness. Infectious diseases specialist at HAMS hospital in Kathmandu Anup Subedi stated that mRNA vaccines are indeed more effective against the new variant but all the shots significantly reduce severity and mortality and therefore, the priority should be to vaccinate as many people as soon as possible and to boost the immune-compromised and frontliners.
- Secretary of the Ministry of Health and Population, Dr Roshan Pokharel, has acknowledged that there is no record of 2 - 2.5 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines and there have been speculations that these vaccines may have been sold to corporate houses. There are also videos in the social media showing vaccine vials being sold in the black market.

- Amid the record surges in COVID-19 cases across the country a meeting on 20th January of the chief district officers of the Valley's three districts has decided to re-introduce odd-even number plate rule for vehicles starting 23rd January. Public health experts have swiftly criticised the decision as impractical, saying fewer public vehicles will cause more crowding in such vehicles and contribute to the spread of infections.
- The Britain-Nepal Society has bought its 9<sup>th</sup> AIRVO High Flow Oxygen Machine for a 50-bed Damak Children Hospital that is being customised into a speciality children's hospital in Eastern Nepal. The initiative to develop better health infrastructure for children in the Eastern provinces of Nepal, as a satellite hospital from their main centre in Kathmandu, is led by eminent physician Dr Bhagwan Koirala and team. The BNS is also taking advice from medical health experts to explore possibilities of collaborating with local partners and contributing towards medical equipment such as BIPAP and CPAP breathing assistance devices, along with display monitors.

### **Relevant Links:**

#### **3rd Covid wave infects Nepal's frontliners**

*The Delta wave resulted in a shortage of oxygen, Omicron so far is causing a shortage of health workers in Nepal's hospitals*

<https://www.nepalitimes.com/here-now/3rd-covid-wave-infects-nepals-frontliners/>

#### **Over 100 doctors, health workers infected with COVID-19 in Chitwan**

<https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/over-100-doctors-health-workers-infected-with-covid-19-in-chitwan/>

#### **Frontliners face hassles for boosters amid mismanagement**

*A lack of communication and poorly managed vaccination centres lead to crowds, forcing many to stand in line for hours.*

<https://kathmandupost.com/health/2022/01/18/frontliners-face-hassles-for-boosters-amid-mismanagement>

#### **76 health workers infected at Bir Hospital**

*Front-line workers affected alarmingly*

<https://english.khabarhub.com/2022/17/232807/>

#### **Gatherings of more than 25 banned in Valley. Vaccination proof a must to access public services from Jan 21**

*Chief district officers issue an 18-point notice, effective from Tuesday midnight, in view of the rising number of Covid-19 cases.*

<https://bit.ly/3zK5hSZ>

#### **Both Omicron, Delta fueling Covid surge in Nepal, experts say**

*Doctors warn against dismissing the new coronavirus variant as 'mild', as it may also lead to hospitalisations*

<https://bit.ly/3qpdrNi>

#### **Coronavirus infection confirmed in more than 50 percent samples tested**

<https://english.khabarhub.com/2022/22/233722/>

## ***Nepal-UK news:***

- **UK's Covid Support to Nepali Army arrives in Kathmandu**

The COVID-19 medical equipment support pledged earlier by the British Army to Nepal Army arrived in Kathmandu on an RAF flight on 20 December.

Colonel Paul Smith, Defence Attaché & Commander British Gurkhas Nepal (BGN) handed over the equipment to Technical Colonel Dr. Moon Thapa of the Nepali Army.

The equipment which includes a PCR Machine, Venturi Reservoir Masks and Continuous Positive Airway Pressure will form part of a 25-bed COVID control facility.

In response to the request made by the Nepali Army in May last year, the British Army had sent a specialist team to advise on response strategies and work on a proposal to provide a COVID-19 medical support package to the Nepali military soldiers.

<https://thehimalayantimes.com/kathmandu/uks-covid-support-to-nepali-army-arrives-in-kathmandu>



- **10,000 Nepali Nurses to Be Sent UK For Employment**

Minister for Labour, Employment and Social Security Krishna Kumar Shrestha has informed that the government is preparing to send 10,000 staff nurses to work in the United Kingdom (UK). An agreement is being reached between officials of the UK's Department of Health Services and National Health Services and the Government of Nepal to send the unemployed staff nurses to the UK, and representatives of the two countries are expected to finalise talks by March 2022.

<https://risingnepaldaily.com/nation/10000-nepali-nurses-to-be-sent-uk-for-employment>

- **New Humanitarian Staging Area inaugurated in Birgunj**

The UK Government, through the UN's World Food Programme in Nepal has funded the construction of a humanitarian staging area in Birgunj (Southern Terai along the border with India). The site is expected to help to increase the capacity of emergency preparedness in a coordinated manner in this province and at local levels.



- The British Ambassador H.E. Nicola Pollitt and 7 other women Ambassadors & Heads of Agencies in Nepal had announced a Leadership Mentoring Programme on International Day of the Girl in 2021. On 21 January, the 8 mentees who will now begin their mentorship for a year has been announced and it is thought this initiative will provide the young girls with great exposure and development of leadership skills.



We've selected the **Final 8** Nepali women we will be mentoring this year!

Mentees



Mentors



- The Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office's Indo-Pacific Director Ben Mellor met Nepal's Finance Secretary Madhu Marasini on December 10<sup>th</sup> 2021 to; Discuss the UK support to Nepal's development objectives; Achieving Nepal's ambitious climate commitments at COP26 in Glasgow; and Nepal's green growth and recovery post-pandemic. In addition, the IP Director also met with the Minister for Forests and Environment Ramsahay Yadav and Minister for Federal Affairs and General Administration Rajendra P. Shrestha to discuss UK support in strengthening Nepal's health systems and building capacity of local governments.



### ***Other Relevant Links to Key UK-Nepal News/Interesting stories:***

**Link to a video of British Ambassador Nicola Pollitt travelling to Mugu region of Nepal along with Ambassadors from the USA and Australia. It also includes her interview in Nepali:**

<https://www.facebook.com/ukinnepal/videos/430426848802034/>

**British Ambassador Pollitt calls on COAS Sharma**

<https://english.khabarhub.com/2021/13/226364/>

**1921 Rendezvous: Mallory, Pumori and Everest**

*Mountaineering was enriched by George Mallory, who was awed by Nepal's himals that he saw over a high pass from Tibet*

<https://www.nepalitimes.com/banner/1921-rendezvous-mallory-pumori-and-everest/>

**Edinburgh store comes full circle to Nepal**

*Scottish trekking pioneer's niece carries on family tradition of improving livelihoods in Nepal*

<https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/edinburgh-store-comes-full-circle-to-nepal/>

**Nepal's Santosh Shah wins MasterChef UK: The Professionals Rematch**

<https://thehimalayantimes.com/entertainment/nepals-santosh-shah-wins-masterchef-uk-the-professionals-rematch>

**Looking back at the 1923 Nepal-Britain Treaty**

It was 98 years ago this week that Nepal signed a treaty with British India that established its independent status

<https://www.nepalitimes.com/here-now/looking-back-at-the-1923-nepal-britain-treaty/>

**What if... the 1923 Nepal-Britain treaty was not signed?**

<https://theannapurnaexpress.com/news/what-if-the-1923-nepal-britain-treaty-was-not-signed-3883>

## ***Health/Education***

- The pandemic has affected routine childhood immunisation in countries like Nepal. Lockdowns and fear of contracting the virus have stopped many parents from travelling to health clinics for measles, polio, whooping cough or tetanus shots. Nepal has also seen a rise in maternal and infant death rates during the pandemic due to reduced institutional deliveries.
- Amid the sharp spike in fresh COVID-19 cases in Nepal, various universities in Kathmandu have decided to postpone the examinations scheduled. Tribhuvan University has announced the postponement of all ongoing and scheduled examinations until further notice. Likewise, Kathmandu University and Purbanchal University have also notified all concerned parties regarding the examination postponement. Meanwhile, the Public Service Commission has also said that it will not conduct any in-person examinations until mid-February. Tribhuvan University has cancelled all exams of annual and semester system scheduled from 23 January after its teachers, professors and students got infected with COVID-19. Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba has given instructions to monitor whether public health safety protocols are being followed in the exams being conducted by the Tribhuvan University. The Guardian's Association had expressed its concern over the fact that students were forced to sit for exams despite being infected with COVID-19.

### **COVID-19 derails child development in Nepal**

The health, learning and psychological well-being of one in every five Nepali children worsened by the pandemic

<https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/covid-derails-child-development-in-nepal/>

### **Nepal bans big public gatherings, closes schools amid COVID spike**

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/11/nepal-bans-big-public-gatherings-closes-schools-covid-spike>

## ***Climate Change/Environment***

- Unusually heavy rains well beyond the monsoon season in October/ November generated a more severe impact than any 2021 monsoon event, with more deaths in one week than over the course of monsoon. Impacts are estimated to be heaviest in agriculture sector with serious implications for food security in the coming months.

**Post-COP26, Nepal's real work now begins**

*Returning from Glasgow, climate activist whose home was swept away by the Melamchi flood urges action*

<https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/post-cop26-nepals-real-work-now-begins/>

### **Agroecology, Nepal's answer to climate change**

*The answer to addressing climate impact is to regenerate the most important ecosystem of all: the soil*

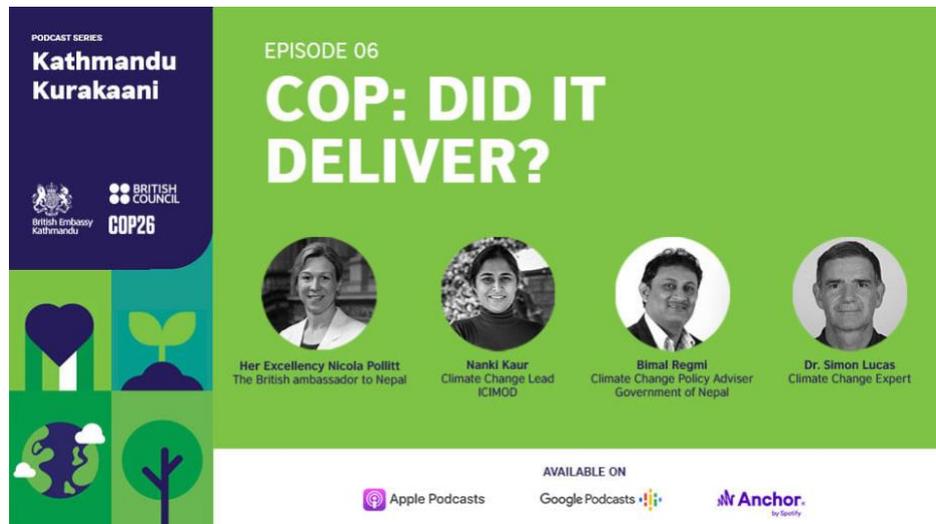
<https://www.nepalitimes.com/banner/agroecology-nepals-answer-to-climate-change/>

### **Indo-Pak tension hits SAARC climate action**

*After a virtually indefinite postponement of the SAARC summit, a regional effort to tackle climate change is also in limbo*

<https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/indo-pak-tension-hits-saarc-climate-action/>

- The last of the podcasts in the series organised by the British Embassy and British Council is now available on the Kathmandu Kurakaani channel: on Spotify, Android and Apple podcasts. “The big question this time: did COP26 deliver? Listen to the experts' views”



## ***Political Affairs/ State***

### **Gagan Thapa, Bishwaprakash Sharma are the newly elected NC general-secretaries**

Aside from the re-appointments of major party Presidents KP Oli and SB Deuba in UML and Nepali Congress respectively in the recent general conventions, more positive responses have been received with the appointment of two younger and prominent Congress party members to the position of General Secretary, following the 14<sup>th</sup> Nepali Congress general convention.

<https://thehimalayantimes.com/kathmandu/gagan-thapa-bishwaprakash-sharma-are-the-new-general-secretaries-of-nepali-congress>

### **Can Congress win elections under Deuba?**

Even though there is a strong presence of youth leaders in the party's 15-member officer-bearer team, there are doubts about its effective functioning. Most elected youths are from anti-Deuba camps and they have repeatedly clashed with Deuba on national and party issues.

<https://theannapurnaexpress.com/news/can-congress-win-elections-under-deuba-3968>

**Ruling alliance agrees to hold local elections in April**

<https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/coalition-agrees-to-hold-local-elections-in-april/>

**Ruling alliance to consult legal experts amid confusion over timing of three polls**

Deuba's coalition partners say they are considering holding the three tiers of election simultaneously.

<https://kathmandupost.com/politics/2022/01/22/ruling-alliance-to-consult-legal-experts-amid-confusion-over-timing-of-three-polls>

**World Economics Forum outlines 5 risk factors for Nepal in 2022**

<https://english.khabarhub.com/2022/23/233838/>

## ***Opinions/Long reads:***

**Omicron: A Concern for Unvaccinated Individuals**

<https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/omicron-a-concern-for-unvaccinated-individuals/>

**South Asian Air Pollution: A Pressing Concern for the Himalayas**

<https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/south-asian-air-pollution-a-pressing-concern-for-the-himalayas/>

**Remembering John Nankervis 1946-2022**

*The pioneering New Zealand mountaineer who preferred not to climb Everest*

<https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/remembering-john-nankervis-1946-2022/>

**Nepal counting its tigers**

*Country's big cat population is increasing, but it is also leading to more human-wildlife contact*

<https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/nepal-counting-its-tigers/>

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