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Britain–Nepal Academic Council

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12 May 2021

To

The Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP

Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State.

Subject: COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal and a call for urgent support

Dear Secretary of State,

The executive committee of the Britain-Nepal Academic Council urges the UK government to take urgent action to support the government of Nepal in the face of the humanitarian crisis which is unfolding in Nepal due to the devastating second wave of COVID-19 in South Asia.

As the world has watched the tragic impact of India's second wave, we are concerned that neighbouring Nepal, which is even less prepared, is being overlooked. We write in the wake of the unprecedented yet urgent call for international support issued by the Prime Minister of Nepal, KP Sharma Oli, published in the Guardian on the 10th May [<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/may/10/nepal-covid-uk-g7>] and following our own round-table discussion today on the situation in Nepal involving prominent experts on public health in Nepal and the UK (<https://www.bnac.ac.uk/activities/covid-19-nepal/>). During our programme Sir Jeremy Farrar, the Director of the Wellcome Trust, described the current situation in Nepal as 'beyond frightening'.

Nepal shares an 1880-kilometre long open border with India, with close cultural, trading and family ties. Thus, the crisis in India has equal resonance across the border in Nepal, and the problems on both sides of the borders need to be tackled simultaneously. The current wave of infections in Nepal is estimated to be just two weeks behind that of India's. The average positivity rate for the last two weeks has been around 45%, and is much higher in villages and towns close to the Indian border. Hospitals across the country are overwhelmed and are experiencing critical shortages of oxygen. Nepal's doctor to patient ratio (1:1724) is one of the lowest in the world (even lower than India (1:1456)). This risks becoming a major humanitarian crisis.

Nepal is a country with which the UK has maintained over two centuries of diplomatic ties. There are an estimated 100,000 Nepal-born residents in the UK. Many more, including serving and ex-Gurkhas with families in Nepal, are directly or indirectly affected by the crisis unfolding in the country. In the face of Nepal's health system being overwhelmed, and the negligible support provided by the international community, we are writing to urge the government of the United Kingdom to extend urgent support to the people of Nepal in three key areas.

First, the UK's scientific expertise has been critical in the pandemic response globally, and health workers in the UK were also the first to experience the devastating waves brought about by more transmissible variants of COVID-19, as we dealt with the B.1.1.7 outbreak this winter. We would thus urge the UK to offer scientific expertise and advice to the Government of Nepal to support it through this difficult period. We would also request the UK to send skilled medical personnel to Nepal, all of whom have been fully vaccinated and are highly experienced now at dealing with this deadly virus in a clinical setting. This could also involve the mobilisation of Gurkha regiments (as the UK did after the 2015 earthquake in Nepal) to set up field hospitals and isolation centres in outlying regions.

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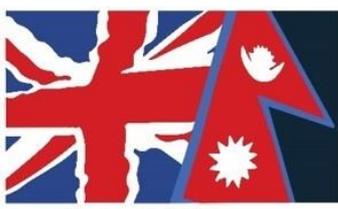
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Second, Nepal is in urgent need of medical supplies. Just as the UK is offering ventilators and oxygen concentrators to India, we would urge that similar support is offered to Nepal. The public health crisis is equally if not more severe in Nepal and the procurement of urgent medical goods is further constrained by Nepal's landlocked location and the crisis in India, the country through which most of its imports transit.

Third, Nepal urgently needs access to vaccines. The UK, as the current G7 Chair, could leverage its international influence to secure vaccine supply to Nepal. More critically, the UK has ordered 517 million doses of Covid-19 vaccine. After vaccinating the approximately 52 million over 18s, we will have a surplus of at least 400 million and we would urge that some of this is set aside for Nepal – being provided sooner rather than later, given the depth of the humanitarian crisis in the country. Approximately 1m doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine were offered to Nepal in March 2021 with Indian support. However, with India ceasing exports, Nepal (like the UK) will not receive the remaining shipment from the Serum Institute. There are now insufficient supplies to offer second doses to the elderly population who received doses in phase 2 of the vaccination campaign in March, and the 12-week mark when these boosters are due is approaching rapidly. While there has been a small shipment of vaccines from China, there are currently no new deliveries due in the coming months.

In the longer term, we would also urge that the government of the UK follows the lead set by the Biden administration in the USA to back the waiver of patents on vaccines, to ensure that the supply of vaccines to low- and middle-income countries, such as Nepal, is accelerated.

Yours sincerely,

Dr [Krishna Adhikari](#), (University of Oxford/Centre for Nepal Studies, UK), *Chair*

And Executive Committee:

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CC: Ms Nicola Pollitt, British Ambassador to Nepal, British Embassy, Lazimpat, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Mr Pradeep Gyawali, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Government of Nepal, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Mr Lokdarshan Regmi, Ambassador of Nepal to the United Kingdom, Kensington Palace Gardens, London.

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