

Bhutan in control so far

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Bhutan reported its first Covid-19 case on March 5, 2020 when an American tourist tested positive for the disease. By March 31, 2020 there were five cases, but no deaths due to the infection. All cases were imported cases and till the end of March there was no instance of local transmission of the virus in the landlocked Himalayan country.

Much like number of its South Asian neighbours, the capacity of Bhutan to handle large number of patients suffering from the infectious disease is limited. The country does not have adequate quarantine facilities, protective gear for its medical personnel, and fully equipped intensive care units at the hospitals. Moreover, Bhutan too had conducted very few tests. Only 558 samples had been tested by March 31, 2020. Those tested included foreigners and locals, who had travelled outside of the country or experienced flu symptoms.

The government, however, reacted proactively after the first case was reported in a tourist and restricted entry of all foreigners into the country with immediate effect for an initial period of two weeks. Education institutions were closed from March 6 and all public gatherings including religious and social ones were banned. People were encouraged to maintain distance while visiting vegetable markets, fuel depots, hospitals and banking facilities.

Moreover, all non-essential and leisure travels within the country were restricted and movements in groups, within the towns and communities were disallowed. 'Work from home' policy was implemented for civil service, corporate and private offices.

On March 22, 2020 Bhutan, which is sandwiched between India and China, closed its land borders. Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, while announcing the closure of the borders said "drastic measure" of sealing its borders was being taken because of the coronavirus pandemic. Addressing the nation, the king said: "As you have been made aware through various government bulletins, the virus is spreading, causing immense disruption worldwide, and drawing closer to us each day. At such a time, the health and safety of the people of Bhutan is of the greatest priority, and as such, we are putting in place every measure necessary to safeguard the people of Bhutan.

Bhutanese government did not restrict the return of its nationals, although those coming back were put under a designated quarantine facility.

The quarantine period was extended from 14 to 21 days with effect from March 31. This decision was taken out of the concern that people could test positive even after quarantining for 14 days. There were 3059 people in quarantine facilities and 339 in home quarantine by the end of March. The extension, therefore, applied to everyone who was in quarantine.

The government introduced buy-back scheme to ensure availability of food items in the country. Under the scheme, government would buy all surplus produce. This step was taken after import of fruits and vegetables was banned on March 24. Stocks of other essential commodities were meanwhile imported from India, which is Bhutan's largest trading partner.

Update: Bhutan has not recorded any new cases since April 1. Bhutan's Foreign Minister Lyonpo (Dr) Tandi Dorji on April 11, 2020 said that more than 5,000 Bhutanese working overseas wanted to return home

because of drying up jobs. Their return could be challenging for Bhutan not just from economic point of view, but also because of the danger that the returnees could bring infection with them.