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Govt. Initiates a Nationwide Lockdown

The country's pandemic scale reached the Red Zone following confirmation of positive cases outside of quarantine facilities

By **Rinchen Dorji**
Thimphu

Following the detection of the first COVID-19 positive case outside the quarantine facility in Gelephu, the government activated a nationwide lockdown from 7.00 am on Tuesday.

Early Tuesday, the people were woken to the news of a 27-year-old woman, a returnee from the Middle East, who was released from a quarantine center after being quarantined for about a month.

Despite testing negative several times, the doctors had advised the woman to report for routine checks during the time of her discharge.

charge. She subsequently tested positive to the virus while she had reported for a check-up at the flu clinic in Gelephu.

She had returned from Kuwait on June 26 and was placed in a mandatory quarantine facility in Paro. The Health Ministry extended her quarantine for a week after she tested positive for the virus thrice on the Rapid test kits. However, throughout her stay in the facility, she tested negative for the virus six times on the RT-PCR test.

Subsequently, the woman was sent home after a month of quarantine after testing negative on the RT-PCR test. However, in keeping with the health protocol, she was advised to report to a flu clinic on August 10. She reported to a flu clinic in Gelephu, where she tested positive on RT-PCR following which she was immediately

isolated at the COVID centre.

Following the verification, the government late on Monday sent reports that there will be nationwide lockdown starting from 7:00 am on Tuesday.

After the announcement, people rushed in thousands across the nation to stockpile essentials. Prime Minister Dr Lotay Tshering, addressing the Nation, said the unprecedented lockdown was enforced to identify and isolate all positive cases immediately breaking the chain of transmission.

Lyonchhen said under the guidance of His Majesty The King, the National COVID-19 Taskforce meeting was held on Monday night for proper coordination and implementation of the lockdown after the

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Bhutan's COVID response serves as an epitome of due diligence to the world, Indian Ambassador

In the wake of a nationwide lockdown, Bhutan Today's Puran Gurung talks with the Indian Ambassador to Bhutan Ruchira Kumboj on the way Bhutan is handling the pandemic situation and the way forward.

Q1. What do you think of the way that Bhutan is handling the pandemic? Is there any advice you would want to give Bhutan as we move forward?

A1. Bhutan has excellently managed the pandemic situation, and while today the virus may not be confined to Quarantine Centres, it is to be noted that there is no community transmission yet.

Needless to add the leadership of His Majesty the King of Bhutan, who has led from the front has been critical in shaping Bhutan's COVID Policy response. In my view, Bhutan's COVID response serves as an epitome of due diligence to the world.

Q2. What has been your biggest challenge as the Indian Ambassador to Bhutan, and how has overcoming it benefitted the two nations?

A2. It has been an action packed tenure, as the Indian Ambassador to **Continued on Pg. 05**



Bhutan's COVID response serves as an epitome of due diligence to the world, Indian Ambassador

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Bhutan. This period has been marked by the State Visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bhutan in 2019, as well as a visit by Lyonchhen Dr. Lotay Tshering to India, also in 2019. The visits of External Affairs Minister Dr. Jaishankar to Bhutan, Lyonpo Tandi Dorji to India, Railways and Commerce & Industry Minister of India Piyush Goyal to Bhutan have added further depth and dimension to the relationship. There is work to be done yet, in follow-up to these visits. Currently, we are also combating the COVID-19 pandemic, and all challenges that this has entailed. India stands steadfastly by Bhutan, as we should, and working together, our two countries will get past the pandemic, towards a sustainable recovery.

As we look ahead, and coinciding with India's 74th Independence Day, what stands out is the solidarity and friendship between our two countries, which will endure.

Q3. What are other areas of development that Bhutan and India haven't looked at yet, and can possibly help the two countries further strengthen their bond of friendship?

A3. Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid a State visit to Bhutan in August 2019, pursuant to which a number of initiatives have been launched in new and emerging areas by our two countries.

In the frontier area of space science & technology, Thimphu is now connected to ISRO's South Asia Satellite and our two teams are also working to develop a small satellite for Bhutan.

In harmony with the priorities of the Royal Government of Bhutan, our focus is on STEM, through an institutional tie-up between the top-level Indian Institutes and their counterparts in Bhutan. Subsequent to the signing of MoUs between RUB and IITs Delhi, Bombay and Kanpur during the visit of Prime Minister Modi to Bhutan last year, Bhutanese engineering students are heading to our prestigious IITs on full ride scholarships, most notably IIT Kanpur, IIT Bombay as well as IIT Delhi.

An Information Highway Exchange has been established to enhance knowledge-sharing between Universities of both our sides, through a tie up between India's National Knowledge Network and Druk REN.

In the financial sector, the emphasis is on 'digital being the new normal', where we are promoting cashless payments through the introduction of the RuPay cards in Bhutan. The launch of Bhutan's Quick Response code is the precursor to the usage of the BHIM (Bharat Interface for Money) app, an Indian digital payment interface, in Bhutan.

Consequent to the 'Bhutan-India Start-Up Summit' organized during the visit of our Railways and Commerce & Industry Minister Piyush Goyal, Bhutanese agri-producers and major Indian supermarkets have joined hands for retail marketing of Bhutanese organic food products in India. We are working towards opening of a regional office of the Confederation of Indian Industry, one of India's leading industry associations. This would be CII's first South Asia office in Bhutan, which will facilitate enhanced Indian investment in Bhutan, providing as well real time assistance & support to the Bhutanese private sector.

Connectivity is critical to the growth of trade and commerce between our two countries. The opening of the new land customs station at Ahlay in Bhutan's southern industrial area of Pasakha has not only facilitated bilateral trade but has also led to decongestion of vehicular traffic along the busy Jaigaon-Phuentsholing route. Rail connectivities are also being explored for further bolstering trade and commerce for the benefit of our two countries and people.

India is committed to providing technical support towards establishment of a Multidisciplinary Super-Specialty Hospital in Thimphu, to backstop the existing health infrastructure in the country.

Another new initiative of the Government of India is the semester-long deployment of our best technical and non-technical faculty members from the Indian Institutes of Technology and top Universities at the colleges of the Royal University of Bhutan with a view to sharing know-how in the latest technologies: Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, 5G technologies etc.

Our activities are increasingly youth-centric, given that both our countries are young. Pursuant to Prime Minister Modi's outreach to Bhutanese youth in August 2019, a group of students from different colleges affiliated to the Royal University of Bhutan had visited India in September 2019. The students had visited the ISRO Telemetry, Tracking and Command Network, Bengaluru; The Energy Research Institute, Delhi; IIT Delhi, Infosys; as well as the Nehru Planetarium in Bengaluru. Finally, they had visited the Mahabodhi Temple Complex in Bodhi Gaya and Nalanda University, as the cultural segment to this excellent visit.

Q4. Owing to India's 'Neighbourhood-First' policy, the world has witnessed India helping its neighbours in abundance. Will the same be expected to rebuild the regional nations once the COVID-19 situation comes to an end as India is seen as the regional heavyweight?

A4. The Government of India, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the helm, firmly believes in the inclusive development of all, with the trust of all, as the cornerstone of India's foreign policy – Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas aur Sabka Vishwas. A priority subset of this is India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy. There are abundant examples of this policy in action.

At the political level, this was uniquely manifested in the invitation extended to the leaders of our neighbouring countries, including Bhutan, for the swearing-in ceremony of Prime Minister Modi in May 2014 and May 2019. In the last six years, there have been over 14 exchanges between India and Bhutan at the highest levels, indicating the importance that the Government of India attaches to our close relations with Bhutan both as a development partner and as a longstanding friend.

Soon after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Prime Minister Modi led the initiative for regional cooperation among SAARC member states and immediately announced a corpus fund of US\$ 10 million, to provide medical assistance to our neighbours. India has extended the fullest cooperation and support to Bhutan in terms of ensuring uninterrupted movement of commodities, facilitating the return of over 1350 Bhutanese nationals by road and also through several special flights, handing over essential medicines and medical supplies to Bhutan, as well as the virtual training of Bhutanese health professionals.

We are honoured that India's gesture has been publicly appreciated by the Bhutanese leadership and we view this as a reflection of the special bonds of trust and understanding between India and Bhutan that have existed over decades. We will continue to stand alongside Bhutan to get past the pandemic and ensure a sustainable recovery.

You would be aware that India is making concerted efforts to develop both Covid-19 rapid tests as well as vaccines. As a responsible regional leader and also the largest economy in South Asia, India will use its capabilities and strengths to work for the shared security and prosperity of all the countries in the region. We believe that our growth can serve as a lifting tide for all our neighbours. In practice, we follow a generous policy, one where we do not expect reciprocity by virtue of the fact that we have comparatively more resources and capability.

Q5. As Bhutan is yet to become a self-reliant country in terms of food security, how could India support Bhutan to achieve food security?

A5. Guided by the principles of our Treaty of Friendship and the bilateral free trade agreement, India has stayed true to its commitments in ensuring full cooperation and assistance to Bhutan in all matters of trade and commerce. This is reflected in the fact that India has consistently been Bhutan's top trading partner and has been facilitating Bhutan's transit trade through India.

Without exception, the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the importance of self-sufficiency in every sector, food security being among the top priority areas. Most recently, Prime Minister Modi launched an Agriculture Infrastructure Fund of Rs. 1000 billion on 9 August 2020, which will benefit farmers and help agri-entrepreneurs in building farming assets and post-harvest infrastructure, thereby promoting self-sufficiency in the agriculture sector.

When India speaks of self-reliance, we are not advocating a self-centered system. Rather, we believe that a self-sufficient India, a country that is an emerging global leader, will inevitably lead to a more prosperous world. Our aim is to ensure India's position as a key participant in global supply chains. Through building capacities at home, we also intend to contribute to mitigating disruptions in global markets. We see no contradiction between wanting to build our economic capacities and looking to play a bigger role in the global economy.

We, therefore, have a commitment and a responsibility to work towards not only our own success in attaining food security but also that of our neighbourhood, which, without any doubt, includes Bhutan.

You will be pleased to know that India is also looking to Bhutan as an import source of food products. Following the important visit of the Indian Minister of Railways and Commerce & Industry, Shri Piyush Goyal, to Bhutan in Feb- **Continued on Pg. 11**

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woman was confirmed of being infected with the virus.

Lyongchen said that after being discharged from the quarantine centre, in the two weeks time she had visited many places and came across numerous people in Paro Thimphu and Gelephu.

Following the confirmation, the government initiated a massive contact tracing. The woman was said to have travelled from Paro and stayed with a relative in Thimphu where she had visited several places including a bank in the capital. She had then hired a taxi to travel to Gelephu.

However, Lyongchen earlier said considering the decent number of people she came across in the two weeks time, the lockdown is expected to last for a week or less.

A day later, on August 11 the news of another person, a 25-year-old man who was working as a loader in RRCO, Phuentsholing was also confirmed positive to the virus.

In addition to the 25-year-old man, two more individuals, a 59-year-old man and a 47-year-old woman also tested positive. However, they were already in quarantine in Phuentsholing.

The 25-year-old had

come to the Phuentsholing Hospital on 11th August 2020 with symptoms following which he was confirmed positive to the virus. However, the man had no known travel history and was put up in a center in Phuentsholing with other loaders working at RRCO and MDP, Phuentsholing.

The confirmation of the positive case triggered a mass contact tracing following which another 12 men, aged 25-48, were confirmed positive to the virus.

However, the 12 men who are the primary contacts of the positive case from Phuentsholing are from the Mini Dry Port quarantine facility and not from the community.

A day later another three, two men and a woman all working at the MDP also tested positive taking the total positive cases in Phuentsholing to 16, following which the government declared the town as a 'Red Zone.'

Sources said the woman was working as a sweeper at the MDP while one of the two men is reported to be a traffic policeman stationed at the MDP.

The confirmation of the new cases while sending fears among the local residents also saw the border town being frozen. The Mini Dry Port also ceased to function following the news.

Meanwhile, two drivers from Tsirang who were suspected to be the primary contacts of the 25-year-old man working at RRCO transshipment area in Phuentsholing as loader on 6th of this month and travelled to Tsirang on 7th were also quarantined. However, their Rapid Diagnostic tests came negative.

As of yesterday about 630 primary contacts of the positive cases from the RRCO and MDP centers in Phuentsholing were traced and quarantined and the tracing is still on.

Following the lockdown, residents of Phuentsholing, without an alternative as there were no door-to-door delivery of essential came out in the opening prompting officials to initiate a door delivery system.

As of yesterday officials of Phuentsholing COVID-19 Taskforce said the Thromde had initiated a door-to-door delivery of essentials by identified grocery stores in the town. They said they can now contact the shops directly on the given phone numbers or dial the emergency toll free number '5555' to place orders.

People also had the choice to call the RRCO or the Food Corporation of Bhutan as alternatives should other means fail.

People from other dzongkhags who were stranded in Phuentsholing were also advised to register with the Taskforce officials.

The Ministry of Health appealed every Bhutanese to strictly abide by the COVID-19 prevention measures put in place by the government. One such critical measure is the mandatory quarantine of 21 days for all Bhutanese entering the country from an overseas travel/stay.

"The Ministry of Health strongly urges all Bhutanese especially those residing in the southern border towns to practice effective physical distancing, good personal hygiene, and proper cough etiquette, at all times," it stated.

Meanwhile, the lockdown meant that students of class X, XII and final year degree students who classes were resumed earlier last month could no longer attend classes until further directives from the government.

"All schools, institutions, offices and commercial establishments will remain closed until further notice. Likewise, ongoing exams will be postponed while the students and trainees in boarding facilities should continue to remain on campus and follow COVID-19 protocols," a government press release

stated.

The prime minister stated that, during the lockdown period, the government will ensure testing of all suspects, quarantine of close contacts and isolation and treatment of confirmed cases. The government will also ensure coordination and facilitate the distribution of essential food supplies and emergency medical services in all the districts.

Meanwhile, yesterday a 34-year-old woman and a 4-year-old girl who are the primary contacts of the first positive case from RRCO, Phuentsholing (25-year-old man) were found to be COVID-19 positive.

The health ministry confirmed that the child is the daughter of the 32-year-old woman who tested positive earlier on Friday. They are in the quarantine facility at Phuentsholing.

Till date, the country has recorded a total of 133 cases as of yesterday. While 102 individuals have recovered 31 cases are still considered active. Following the detection of the new cases outside of quarantine facilities, the country's pandemic scale is now altered into a Red Zone.

Bhutan's COVID response serves as an epitome of due diligence to the world, Indian Ambassador

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ruary this year, Bhutanese agri-producers and major Indian supermarkets have begun discussions for retail marketing of Bhutanese organic food products in India. We are optimistic that this arrangement will boost Bhutanese agri-exports, adding a fresh dimension to the bilateral commercial relationship.

Q6. Reports are in the media that hydroelectricity situation in the country in dampening. What would be the fate of the P1 project if the final reports of the German and Austrian companies hired by RGoB are not promising? What could the two countries do to rectify the situation?

A6. The Hydropower cooperation story in Bhutan looks promising, we remain committed to partner with Bhutan in this crucial sector for the mutual benefit of two countries and our people. We have recently inked the Concession Agreement for the 600 MW KHEL (Kholongchhu

Hydropower Project), the first Joint Venture model between our two countries, which should open up a whole new chapter of beneficial cooperation in eastern Bhutan.

In 2019, India and Bhutan have jointly delivered the 720 MW Mangdechhu Project, which has recently received international recognition, through award of the prestigious Brunel Medal from the UK-based Institution of Civil Engineers. Currently, Mangdechhu has surpassed the projected profit target.

The Punatsangchhu-II Project is also on track for delivery by the July 2022 timeline.

As for the Punatsangchhu-I Project, both sides are making every effort to ensure that this project is brought back on track within the earliest time frame, for the mutual benefit of our two countries and our people.