



DIALOGUE

EXPERT SPEAK

30 MARCH 2020

“NEPALI CITIZENS RESPONSE TO COVID19”

ABSTRACT

Asian Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs conducted its second EXPERT SPEAK interview with Mr. Sunil K.C. COVID19 has somehow become the reality for everyone today. However, there is something distinct how Nepali's have been undergoing this crisis and the nationwide lockdown. The interview has tried to dwell into the questions pertaining to a Nepali's response to the COVID19 Crisis and the challenges associated to it.

EXPERT



Mr. Sunil KC

Chief Executive, Asian Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs (AIDIA)Expert

About the Expert :

Mr. Sunil K.C. is Founder and CEO of the Asian Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs (AIDIA) Sunil is also the Chairman at Asia Corporation Private Limited, one of the emerging commercial enterprises of Kathmandu. He is also Vice President at Nepal India Chamber of Commerce & Industry (NICCI). He is also a Board Member at Ghashi Saving & Credit Cooperative Limited; Policy Adviser at EDU Inter Governmental Organization, Belgium; and a Visiting Faculty Member at Mid-Western University (MWU), Nepal.

TRANSCRIPT OF THE TALK

Q1. After the lockdown, what is the condition in Nepal now?

The one-week lockdown which started on March 24 was extended for one more week till April 7 and all flights have been suspended till April 15th. So the things are on the right track in Nepal. We have detected five cases of COVID-19 and one has already recovered and discharged.

Yesterday (29th March) we received the medical testing kits from China. So, now the government has distributed these in all of the provinces of Nepal for testing the people. They are planning to test around 30,000 people all over the country.

While people are facing difficulties as they are not getting the day-to-day supplies of food items and supply of Gas cylinder. This has become an issue in Kathmandu. The government is not being able to distribute the food supply properly to the people. Another thing is as we have to open borders, people who are coming from India are not being tested and quarantined properly. They are coming in a very open way as there are no proper testing at the border check posts. This is a major threat for the Nepalese society.

Q.2. What are the major steps which are taken by the citizens in controlling this pandemic and is and how are their responses similar or different from a past epidemic? Can you talk about some of the past epidemics which has happened in Nepal?

Like for this COVID19 outbreak, people are following the lockdown in a very serious way. For example in the capital city of Kathmandu region, you will find that the people are stepping outside the home only to buy the essential items and there are very limited people outside.

I have seen it even in the Kathmandu city. The people are following the guidelines given by the Ministry of Health. They are using masks even when they are going to the small shops outside their home. They are using the masks and they are maintaining distance with

the people. Even in the homes, people are using the masks which is good on people's part. They are very much serious about this pandemic.

Like if you see the previous cases, that was the different case. Before communications facilities available were not such as they are now. If take the case of Cholera epidemic which has first recorded in Nepal in 1823, followed by series in 1831, 1862 & 1887. The largest outbreak of Cholera happened in Jajarkot in the mid-West region in 2009, which affected more than 30,000 people and 500 people lost their lives. At that time there was a lack of information circulation due to limited communication channels. So, we weren't getting the information on time and the organised information campaign was very much limited.

These days everyone has a mobile phone and people are getting information through social media. Time to time, many media outlets are giving positive information. So, I think these days people are very much sensitive and are taking things seriously by themselves due to the effective information circulation and better communication facilities which has helped in fighting this epidemic.

Q3. What are the major challenges with the people of Nepal are facing according to you?

One of the major challenges face by Nepal is, firstly, the government is not testing the peoples who are coming from third countries like Qatar are Saudi Arabia. All the five cases which have been reported cases only from tourists from Belgium, France, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. So, the government missed the opportunity to test the people who were coming from foreign countries at the airport due to lack of testing kits. These people who have entered Nepal without proper testing possess a serious challenge to Nepalese residents.

Secondly, we don't have enough health infrastructure in the country which is another challenge. Transportation is another problem. If someone gets sick, it would be very difficult for people to reach the hospital in this lockdown. People are not being able to reach the hospital on time. The government has not been able to provide the proper transport to reach the hospital. We lack ambulance services we also don't have enough safety equipment like the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kits.

Thirdly, the small businesses or the people who were working on day to day basis, they are not getting any kind of help from the government. So, looks like, the situation would be difficult for these people if the lockdown is further extended for 15 or 20 more days.

Q4. In Nepal and Kathmandu, in particular, has a lot of industry. So how are the workers coping with this situation? Are they migrating to their villages, or they are staying in the places of work? What is the situation on this thing?

Before the lockdown schools were closed so a lot of people left earlier and have reached the villages. All of the hotels were closed before 24th March and most of the people who were working in the hospitality sectors had left the cities and reached their home before national lockdown. I read in the newspapers that the Indian people who are working in the factories in Nepal are stuck here. In the construction sector in Nepal, majority of the workers come from West Bengal. They are now stuck at the Nepalese border and wants to go to India. Similarly, Nepalese who were in India for the work, they want to come back to Nepal but they are not getting the entry. This crisis has affected the economy and the government has given some offers and have been trying to help the tourism sector. The tourism organisations will pay daily or monthly wages to their workers until Chaitra (last month of Nepali calendar).

Q5. What is one USP or edge which the citizen of Nepal has which will aid them in fighting the spread of COVID19?

People are following rules and regulations and are having strict personal hygiene. In both rural and urban areas, people have understood the seriousness of this issue. They have responded to this situation adequately.

Q6. Are you trying to say that the discipline with which people are following the guidelines given by the government is the biggest USP or the biggest edge with the people citizen of Nepal have to fight this epidemic?

Yes, even in village areas people are following guidelines very strictly, they are not coming outside even in the village area. This could be a good USP for Nepal in coping with this.

Q7. So how are the people in the village area getting their essentials? Did they stock all the essentials in their home before or they have a self-sustainable way of life and need limited things from outside their village limited? Is that the reason there is no chaos in the villages in Nepal?

In Nepal, people are not so much poor in villages. They produce their food materials needed for survival. So, one-month lockdown will not be a big issue for the rural people. Even during the blockade, people were having sufficient food supplies in their villages. That was the times were more troubled than what the situation is at present. So, if the lockdown is extended, it won't cause many problems in terms of food items for the people living in the village area.

Q8 You're trying to say is that in that manner the people of Nepal are very much sustainable even in the lockdown is extended for a longer period.

People are ready to cope with the situation. The village people are generally patient. There will be some problems in the city areas over supply of food items. But, the Government has started to distribute food items but then also they will not be able to do this for a longer period and will be able to cope with the situation in a very limited way. The reason for this is that Nepal is an import based economy and depends on imports for supplies of essential items. But some of the people have already stored the food items in their homes before the lockdown. In that condition, I think there would not be the more panic over this but for a limited period.

About the Interviewer:



Alakh Ranjan is currently working as Research Assistant with Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS). He has done his Masters International Relations and Area Studies, specialisation in South Asia and Bachelors in Journalism from GGSIP University. He has also worked as Young Professional on politics and foreign policies of Nepal and Bhutan at Vivekananda International Foundations (VIF). His research focuses on Soft Power Diplomacy and Indian Foreign Policy in the Neighbourhood.

About Expert Speak:



Expert Speak is an initiative by Asian Institute of Diplomacy and International Affairs (AIDIA), Kathmandu. It is one of the ways we are conducting Dialogue between the curious and the expert. These experts are from different fields with different experiences. Similar is the case with the interviewers. Under the project, Expert Speak, we are undertaking a series of interviews, not just in Nepal but from experts worldwide. The project intends to dwell on the key challenges to Nepal's Foreign and Economic Policies. Also, the project intends to understand Nepal's geopolitical challenges opportunities.