

Three policemen suspended over death of Dalit youth in Rautahat

The Ministry of Home Affairs took the decision on Monday, officials said.

SHIVA PURI
RAUTAHAT, SEPT 1

Three Nepal Police personnel, including an inspector, have been suspended over the custody death of a Dalit youth in Rautahat.

Following continued protests by friends and relatives of Bijay Mahara of Garuda Municipality, who died after allegedly being tortured by police in custody, the Ministry of Home Affairs suspended Inspector Nabin Kumar Singh of the District Police Office and head constable duo Feroz Miya Dhuniya and Mannu Kumar Singh of Janakpur Police Office.

The three officers have been suspended for six months starting Monday.

Deputy Superintendent Ansu Singh, spokesperson for Province 2 Police Office, informed that a secretary-level meeting of the Home Ministry on Monday decided to suspend the officers pending an investigation.

Bijay and six others were arrested on August 19 in connection to the death of 17-year-old Niranjana Ram in Garuda Municipality.

Nineteen-year-old Bijay died on August 26 and his family members have claimed that he was tortured in custody.

Police have been saying that Bijay died in the course of treatment for a kidney ailment.

However, a video of Bijay, which was recorded at the hospital prior to his death, shows him saying that he was tortured by police in civilian clothes and forced to confess to the August 16 murder.

Meanwhile, Province 2 Police Office, Janakpur has recalled Deputy Superintendent Gyan Kumar Mahato from Area Police Office, Garuda and sent Deputy Superintendent Narendra Kunwar in his place. Kunwar took up his duty at the police office from Monday evening onwards.

Government preparing to accord formal status to remote and virtual classes

Education experts, however, warn that a large number of children still don't have to access distance learning.

BINOD GHIMIRE
KATHMANDU, SEPT 1

It has been five months since 11-year-old Sandeep Poudel has been cut off from teaching-learning activities. The seventh-grader at Deependra Home Jun Secondary School from Gadhawa Rural Municipality-4 in Dang does not have access to online study, nor is he aware that there are other learning platforms available for him.

"I study on my own whenever I feel like it," said Poudel. His family doesn't own a TV and nobody has informed him about the classes broadcast on a local radio station.

A local FM radio with financial support from the rural municipality has been broadcasting classes for five major subjects targeting the students from grade 4 to 10. The three-month radio programme sponsored by the local government ended on Sunday. Students like Sandeep never got to participate in these classes.

Ganesh Basnet, a mathematics teacher at Sandeep's school, doubts the programme was beneficial. Basnet himself has been guiding the students around his locality in his free time.

"Classes run through radio and TV mediums are not interactive. There's a one-way flow of information and the students may not grasp the lessons," he said.

Fourteen-year-old Suraj Magar is an eighth-grader at Bhagwati Secondary School in Dhikura, Arghakhanchi. He, too, has not had a single day of lesson ever since the schools got closed in March due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

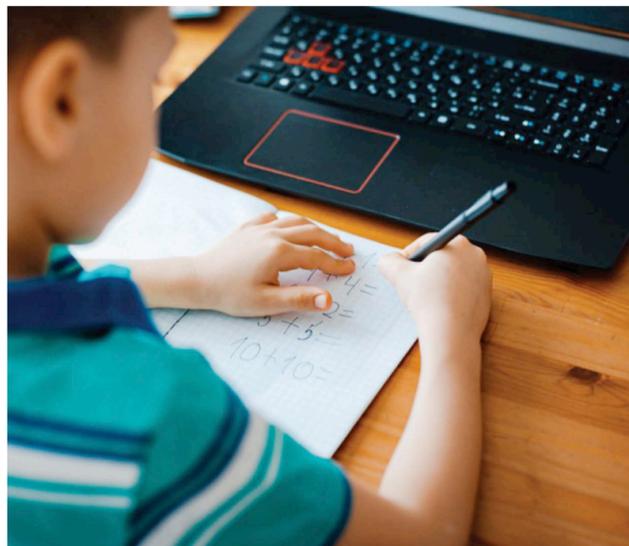
Though he has got the textbooks, which the government provides for free of cost, he hasn't got the chance to learn from them so far.

Like Sandeep, Suraj has no idea about remote and virtual learning platforms.

"I don't know," he replied when asked whether he had heard about remote classes.

He thinks that his classes will resume after his school starts.

Meanwhile, the federal government in Kathmandu is taking one decision after another regarding virtual learning apparently unbeknownst to the fact that millions of students like



The government hasn't carried out any study to find out the proportion of students who are attending remote or virtual learning programmes.

Sandeep and Suraj, who are based in rural parts of the country, cannot attend remote classrooms.

There are around 7 million students in the school system from pre-primary to grade 12 levels, studying in 36,000 public and private schools across the country.

After assessing that the resumption of schools and colleges was not possible immediately, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology had introduced a set of guidelines for virtual classes, set to come into force from June 16. The guidelines envision engaging students in the learning process online or through television and radio.

The ministry, however, had made it clear at the time that remote learning wouldn't be counted as the formal schooling but just a means to engage students in the teaching-learning process.

But as the coronavirus infection continues to progress across the coun-

try, the ministry is considering giving formal education status to remote and virtual teaching-learning.

To this end, a meeting of the National Curriculum Development and Evaluation Council, led by Education Minister Giriraj Mani Pokharel, on Thursday agreed to give a formal education status to education imparted through online and broadcast platforms.

"The formalisation process of the decision is the only thing pending, as there are few technical issues that need to be fixed," Ganesh Bhattarai, director of the Curriculum Development Centre, told the Post.

Meanwhile, education experts have urged the government to authorise virtual and remote classrooms only after ascertaining the number of the students who were able to access virtual and remote classes in the past five months.

They say the ministry's decision comes at a time when different reports

suggest that a majority of school students don't have access to either of three—online, television and radio—medium to take the classes.

"There is no uniformity even within the students from the same class. Some have studied through virtual medium while others haven't," Binaya Kusiya, a professor at Tribhuvan University and an authority on school education, told the Post.

"There should be a proper plan to ensure those who have been left out from the study opportunities get to learn equal to those who have studied through the virtual medium," said Kusiya, who has done several research on school education.

A recent survey report by UNICEF Nepal also shows that more than two-thirds of the schoolchildren in Nepal are deprived of distance learning.

The Child and Family Tracker Survey carried out among 7,500 households also shows that the poorer the household, the less likely it is that children can access or will use distance learning. "The data shows that only five percent of children in the poorest households have access to and use distance learning," reads the report.

With its reports suggesting a large number of students don't have access to virtual learning, the UN body has urged the governments to prioritise the safe reopening for schools when they begin easing lockdown restrictions. "When reopening is not possible, UNICEF urges governments to incorporate compensatory learning for the lost instructional time into school continuity and reopening plans," reads the report.

The Nepal government hasn't done any study to suggest what percent of students have missed the virtual class.

Bhattarai, the director of the Curriculum Development Centre, however, said they are aware that large numbers of students have been left out of the teaching-learning process during the lockdown. "We are devising separate interventions for such students. One could be organising additional classes for them when the schools resume," he said.

Dummies make Valley road users aware of proposed hike in fines

The Metropolitan Traffic Division Office has already talked to the Department of Transport Management to raise the fines, officials say.

ANUP OJHA
KATHMANDU, SEPT 1

The Metropolitan Traffic Division Office has installed mannequins dressed as traffic police at various locations of the city to make road users aware of proposed hikes in fines after dozens of personnel tested positive for coronavirus.

The placard-holding mannequins are part of the police's campaign to convey to the public that fines are being hiked, officials said as the number of traffic police personnel to contract the disease in the Valley soared to 133.

"We put up the placards to send a clear message to the people that they will be charged Rs 500 to 10,000 if they violate the traffic rules," said Senior Superintendent Bhim Prasad Dhakal, chief at the Metropolitan Traffic Police Division, which has put up 22 mannequins in various parts of the city holding placards that read "violating the traffic rules may attract a fine of up to Rs 10,000."



A mannequin donning a traffic police uniform holds a placard that says, "Traffic violators may be fined up to Rs 10,000."

The division office had last year—during the tenure of chief Basant Pant—announced a hike in traffic vio-

lation fines from Rs 500 to up to Rs 10,000. But after the criticism from the media and various sections of

society, the division fixed the maximum fine at Rs 1,000.

The division has been booking bikers and motorists for drunk driving (MaPaSe) and fining them Rs 1,000 and making it compulsory for them to attend an hour-long class on traffic rules. It has been charging Rs 500 for those who violate lane discipline.

"We have placed the dummies with placards so that people are aware of the new rules," said Dhakal. The office has installed mannequins dressed in police uniform in front of Singhadurbar, and in Maitighar, Naya Baneshwor, Baluwatar, Lainchaur, Bhotahiti, Bhadrakali, Thapathali, Kalimati, Kalanki, Jadibuti, Koteshwor, Gaushala, Purano Baneshwor, Krishna Pauroti, Nagdhunga and Jagati.

Rameshwor Yadav, newly appointed spokesperson for the division, said the division office is planning to install a total of 50 dummies across the Valley. He said the dummies, each of which costs Rs 18,000, also serve another purpose.

"We have installed the dummies with money from Kathmandu Metropolitan City," said Yadav. "The dummies look like a traffic police, and during the night, people who drive under the influence of alcohol will take them for traffic police," said Yadav.

He said those found violating lane discipline will soon be charged Rs 10,000. Yadav also said the department has already consulted the Department of Transportation to implement the new. "Till now, the law does not permit traffic police to charge more than Rs 2,000, but once the Department of Transport Management decides, violators can be charged up to Rs 10,000," said Yadav.

Asked if the new fines were exorbitant, Yadav said "Once rule violators are charged, they will become aware and strictly follow the rules," he said. In his conversation with Post, Yadav also said that police in developed countries charge violators exorbitant fines. So people hardly break the rules there, he said.

Period poverty in the time of a pandemic

For the past five months, sanitary napkins haven't reached many remote villages, forcing girls to go back to using unhygienic methods, according to a study.

ELISHA SHRESTHA
KATHMANDU, SEPT 1

On the day the government announced the nationwide lockdown in March, Sneha was on the first day of her period. Fearing she would have no access to sanitary napkins, she rushed to a nearby shop.

"I knew then the pandemic would cause a shortage of sanitary pads in our village in no time," said the 16-year-old from Bajhang.

And her concern came true. Ever since the lockdown was clamped on March 24, most of the shops in Dhamilekh, Sneha's village, have remained shut. Those shops that opened, meanwhile, ran out of menstrual products. "We have been deprived of sanitary pads throughout the lockdown since the shops are unable to restock," said Sneha, who asked to be identified by her first name only.

According to Sneha, the unavailability of sanitary napkins has forced her to go back to using pieces of "uncomfortable" cloth.

It is no secret that Nepali women face many challenges during their periods, especially in rural areas, where there is a severe lack of menstrual hygiene awareness. Sanitary napkins are brought in limited num-

bers and they come quite expensive. As a result, many women are forced to use unhygienic means—including rags, old pieces of clothes, even leaves—during their monthly cycle, increasing their risk of contracting reproductive tract infections and more severe diseases like cervical cancer.

And now, as many parts of the country continues to be forced into another lockdown to curb the spread of Covid-19, gender rights activists are concerned that this has led to a rise in period poverty—a phenomenon already existing in rural Nepal where women are deprived of basic menstrual health facilities.

"Periods don't stop for a pandemic," said Ashwin Karki, an activist for dignified menstruation and coordinator of Amnesty International Nepal's Barahi Youth Network. "Yet not much has been spoken about how the pandemic has forced girls and women to compromise with their menstrual hygiene."

According to a recent survey among 61 health professionals from 24 countries, including Nepal, which was conducted by Plan International UK, a non-profit working for children's rights and gender equality, 43 percent stated that women are facing restrict-



In an effort to improve access to sanitary pads, mentors have been assigned to not only tutor girls, but also to teach them to make reusable, and hygienic sanitary napkins.

ed access to products through shortages or disrupted supply chains because of the pandemic.

Another study conducted in four districts of rural Nepal—Surkhet, Parsa, Dhading and Lamjung—by Voluntary Service Overseas Nepal (VSO Nepal), a nonprofit, found that out of 114 mentors who participated in the survey, 77 percent informed that due to lack of accessibility and

affordability of sanitary pads, a majority of young school-going girls have started using cloths and homemade pads instead. A VSO Nepal mentor, in collaboration with schools in remote areas in Nepal, has been providing tutoring classes, life skill training and menstrual and reproductive health information to young girls.

According to Muni Kumari Gupta, one of the mentors who participated

in the survey, along with movement restriction, which has ceased delivery of menstrual hygiene products to remote areas, closure of schools has also affected the supply of pads.

"In the past few years, many public schools in Parsa district, with the help of the local government and civil society, were able to provide pads for free to girls. As a result, even those who couldn't afford to buy one were able to use them," said Gupta.

In an effort to provide a solution to this problem, under VSO Nepal's Sisters for Sisters mentorship programme, Gupta has been assigned to not only mentor girls with their studies, but also teach them to make reusable, hygienic sanitary napkins.

For 15-year-old Anjali Patel, learning how to make homemade sanitary pads has helped her and her mother overcome the shortage of pad during the pandemic.

"Due to the financial constraint of Covid-19, my family wasn't able to buy me sanitary pads. Now that I know how to make my own homemade pads, I feel relief and less anxious when it comes to managing my periods," said Patel.

Meanwhile, there have been various reports on the inadequacies of the quarantine and isolation facilities

Forest fires down across country this year, says study

CHANDAN KUMAR MANDAL
KATHMANDU, SEPT 1

The Covid-19 pandemic has come as a blessing for the country's green cover.

A study published in the World Development journal found that forest fires went down considerably this year.

Nearly 5 percent decrease in forest fire incidents was reported between December and April which could be attributed in part to the restricted public movement, according to the study authored by Jayash Paudel, an environmental economist.

"Reduction in forest fire incidents is an unintended positive spillover impact of Covid-19 pandemic," Paudel, professor of economics at Boise State University in the US, told the Post. "While the pandemic has caused a massive effect—both short-term and long-term repercussions on the economy, health and labour market—it has left a short-term positive impact on the environment sector for a country which loses significant area of forest cover every year."

The researcher had relied on satellite data available on the Fire Information for Resource Management System for real-time active fire locations from December 4, 2019 to April 9, 2020. Based on real-time fire incidents, he measured the brightness of the forest fire to its severity, the energy released from the fire for knowing intensity and the number of forest fire events or the number of wildfires.

It is estimated Nepal loses around 200,000 hectares of forest cover every year since to forest fires. Most of these fire incidents are human-induced and occur during the dry season, mostly between March and May.

"It is a well-documented fact that nearly 90 percent of wildfires are caused by human activities in Nepal and when people were out of the forest and remained indoors during the lockdown phase, it naturally brought down the incidents of forest fires."

"The positive impact of lockdown in the form of lesser wildfire incidents were even stronger in districts where public movements were strictly implemented. Other than the absence of humans in the forests, high pre-monsoon rainfall this spring may have dampened the number of fires as well."

For developing countries like Nepal, annual forest fire has been a major threat to the loss of hundreds of thousands of hectares of green cover, biodiversity, human lives and property.

Most of these fires have been linked with deliberate burning while making land for farming, while collecting non-timber forest products, due to human negligence and accidents causing massive forest degradation and damage of physical infrastructure affecting livelihoods of people, according to Paudel.

"Estimates suggest that forest fires result in an annual economic loss of Rs5,000 per household, equivalent to 7.32 percent of the annual gross domestic product per capita in Nepal," said Paudel.

According to him, a rough calculation suggested that Covid-19 induced reduction in the number of forest fire incidents resulted in an economic gain of Rs360 per household.

"This does not mean that the global pandemic, in general, is beneficial for us," said Paudel. "Instead, this study points out that environmental benefits from reduced incidences of forest fires and improved air quality during the lockdown may partially offset the socioeconomic cost of pandemics across different parts of the globe."