

17 May 2021

The Hon. Scott Morrison, MP
Prime Minister
PO Box 1420
Parramatta NSW 2147

cc: The Hon. Greg Hunt MP, Minister for Health
cc: The Hon. Senator Marise Payne, Minister for Foreign Affairs
cc: The Hon. Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Trade, Tourism and Investment

Dear Prime Minister,

We write, as Nepalese-Australian community associations and DFAT-accredited organisations supporting health and community programs in Nepal, out of deep concern for the current wave of COVID engulfing India and its near neighbours – particularly Nepal. We urge you to take additional measures and commit additional resources to address this humanitarian crisis.

We welcome the commitments that the Australian Government has already made to respond to the COVID pandemic in our region, and particularly its contributions to the COVAX facility and support for the Regional Vaccines Access and Health Security Initiative. We also welcome the Government's recent announcement of provision of medical equipment to India, along with additional financial assistance announced in the budget, in response to India's second wave COVID crisis.

Driven by the same, highly-infectious, "double mutant" variant, and by workers returning from India to their homes, Nepal is experiencing the same rapid increase in COVID cases which is already overwhelming an under-resourced and over-burdened health system. In the last twenty-four hours, over 7,000 new infections have been reported, a 2,500% increase in less than one month. For nearly a month (from 12 April), Nepal's COVID reproduction rate has been over 1.7, the highest in the world. As Nepal's testing facilities are limited, the true number of cases is certainly much higher.

There are currently few or no available beds in any of the hospitals treating COVID patients and oxygen supply is extremely limited. Just 360,000 people have received the second vaccination dose (in a nation of almost 30 million people) and only 7% of the population have received a first dose. India's vaccine export restrictions, and limited affordability and accessibility of vaccines globally, have disrupted vaccine rollout across Nepal.

Nepal's Prime Minister, KP Sharma Oli, recently wrote: "Nepal's history is one of hardship and struggle, yet this pandemic is pushing even us to our limits." We support his appeal to the international community, "to help [Nepal] with vaccines, diagnostic tools, oxygen kits, critical care medicines and equipment, to support our efforts to save lives."

Australia and Nepal have enjoyed warm diplomatic relations for over sixty years, cemented through tourism and cultural sharing, through migration and study programs, and through Australia's generous response to the devastating 2015 earthquake. More than 117,000 people born in Nepal make Australia their home, more than 40,000 Australians travelled to Nepal in 2019 and, prior to the COVID pandemic, Nepalese students comprised the third largest group among Australia's international student cohort.

In light of Nepal's COVID crisis, we call on the Australian Government, as a matter of urgency, to:

- provide essential medical equipment and resources – such as ventilators, oxygen concentrators and PPE – as well as additional funds to support Nepal's medical response;
- increase direct funding and provision of additional vaccine doses to the the COVAX facility – noting that Australia's fair share contribution to COVAX's Advance Market Commitment is \$200 million in 2021; and
- support the WTO TRIPS proposal put forward by India and South Africa – to waive trade barriers which prevent or restrict the production and distribution of vaccines, diagnostics and treatments to fight COVID.

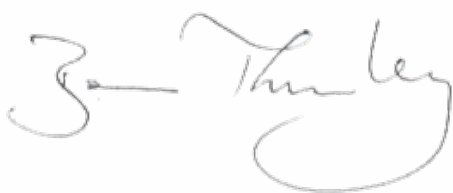
As cases soar in Nepal and globally, we know that an effective and equitable global response requires a rapid and massive expansion of global vaccine production and rapid sharing of knowledge and technologies to prevent, diagnose and treat COVID and particularly to prevent and respond to the emergence of further SARS-CoV-2 variants which are more transmissible and/or resistant to vaccines.

We are disturbed that Australia has to date refused to support India and South Africa's WTO TRIPS Council proposal to temporarily waive World Trade Organization intellectual property rules which act as barriers to the production of urgently needed treatments, equipment and vaccines at affordable prices. We join with the Public Health Association of Australia and Médecin Sans Frontières and call on you to follow the lead of the United States of America and announce your Government's support for this urgent, necessary and time-limited emergency measure.

By taking the actions outlined above, Australia will not only help the people of Nepal, but will also contribute to safeguarding Australia's own health security, and help to hasten the end of the global pandemic.

We write in hope and expectation of your Government's attention to these matters.

Please address any correspondence concerning this letter to Ben Thurley, CEO – INF Australia [0431 985 009 / ceo@au.inf.org]



Federation of Nepalese Community Associations of Australia



Non-Resident Nepali Association Australia



Australia Nepal Friendship Society



Nepalese Association of Queensland



Nepalese Association of Northern Territory



Nepali Society of Tasmania



Nepalese Association of Victoria



Nepalese Association of Western Australia



Didi Bahini Samaj Victoria



Geelong Nepalese Association



Sydney Nepali Church



United Nepalese Christian Church



Oceania Nepali Sports Meet



Nepalese Recreational Club



Adelaide Nepalese Cricket Association



Canberra Nepalese Cricket Club



Canberra Nepalese Football Club



Canberra Nepalese Volleyball Club



Adara Development



Australian Himalayan Foundation



Australian Lutheran World Service



Caritas Australia



Health Serve Australia



International Needs Australia



International Nepal Fellowship Australia



Tearfund Australia



Transform Aid International