



**DIALOGUE**

# EXPERT SPEAK

03 MAY 2020

## “BHUTANESE RESPONSE TO COVID19”

### ABSTRACT

Covid19 has somehow become the reality of everyone today. The interview has tried to dwell into the questions pertaining to a Bhutan's response to the Covid19 Crisis and the challenges associated to it. In this episode of Expert Speak, Mr Khampa Tshering answers some important questions regarding response of Bhutan's citizen and state.

## **EXPERT**



**Mr. Khampa Tshering**  
**Chief Executive Officer, Bhutan NetCom**

### **About the Expert:**

Khampa is the CEO of Bhutan NetCom, a multi-service operator (MSO), providing television contents in Bhutan. Prior to joining the company, Khampa was a business, media and research consultant. He began his career as a journalist and a writer. He has worked with various clients in government and private sector in Bhutan in areas such as research, management, branding and marketing, content development and publications, information technology, audio-visual media, project development, and business strategies. He has also rendered his consulting services to the international organizations. He occasionally teaches business studies at the Royal Thimphu College. He holds a BA in English Literature and MA in Communication Arts.

## **TRANSCRIPT OF THE TALK**

### **Q.1. When did people of Bhutan first get aware of Covid-19? And what was the source of information?**

A. I guess people of Bhutan were aware of the novel coronavirus through international and national media. Most of the people got the information online and from mass media. In addition to mass media, our government is active on social media to disseminate information to the people.

### **Q.2. When was the first outbreak reported and when did you start taking it seriously?**

A. The first outbreak of the pandemic in Bhutan was reported when a 76-year old male American tourist was detected positive. So, it was an imported case. Soon afterwards his 59-year old partner was also tested positive. The government of Bhutan treated them with all the resources available in the country. The tourists opted to go home.

The Royal Government of Bhutan took the pandemic seriously from the day our country was aware of such outbreak in China since we have contiguous border with it. The government prepared all kinds of strategies to face the pandemic if ever it hits the country. When the country received its first case, our King was selfless to intervene to make sure people were safe from the disease. Upon the King's advice, all borders of the country were sealed and thousands of

Bhutanese living across the borders were brought back home into temporary shelters. Moreover, the government took all possible means to bring back the Bhutanese from abroad as well. The Ministry of Health led the actions on health to ensure people are thoroughly informed on preventive and safety measures. Tests were conducted to ensure there were no cases in the country. Most importantly, all vulnerable population were brought under the ambit health action priority.

**Q.3. Where you following the situation in China in January and did you realize that this will turn into a global pandemic?**

A. Well, I was following the news and information on the disease when it first broke out in China. But I was doing that at my personal level. And of course, I had fears that the infection might spread in the region around China if not globally. It's all over the world now. My heart is with those families who lost their loved ones to this disease. It's so painful to watch news and see how people are being buried in mass in other countries.

**Q.4. How is the current situation in Bhutan?**

A. As of responding to this interview, Bhutan as seven confirmed cases of coronavirus cases. Five have recovered and, touch wood, there is no death so far. All are imported cases. Besides first two infected being the Americans, rest are Bhutanese who returned from abroad.

**Q.5. I want to know the how the citizens have responded to this epidemic and the subsequent lockdown?**

A. The news of the outbreak in Bhutan had sent some people into panic. But the government, through media and its local government and grassroots network, has calmed the situation. Bhutan is yet to be put under a lockdown. Partial lockdowns have been placed beginning last week.

**Q.6. Which section of the society is most affected due to this lockdown in Bhutan?**

A. In terms being susceptible to the disease, the vulnerable population are at direct risk. So, the Bhutanese government is making sure these groups like senior citizens, children below two years, pregnant mothers, and most importantly, the frontline health workers are given high priority in terms of protection and resources to stay away from the pandemic.

**Q.7. What are the major challenges faced by the people of Bhutan?**

A. Some of the challenges faced by the people are being laid off from work or being forced go on leave without pay, disruption of normal life, international repatriation, rise in prices of goods (although government is strictly monitoring the case), and social anxiety where the pandemic might overwhelm our limited resources.

**Q.8. Can you tell me the similarities and differences to rural people's response and urban people's response to this pandemic?**

A. Rural people are worried because the pandemic might spread towards them from urban areas. People in town and cities are worried if folks might lie about their travel history who are returning from abroad. Few even tried sneaking into the country through unguarded entries. People in urban areas are also reeling from job loss, however, having to pay house rents, and buy essential items to sustain through such period of the pandemic.

**Q.9. Do you think citizen are taking enough steps to limit the spread of the virus?**

A. Most of the people are trying to follow government's advice to stay home and limit their movement to and from work. People are trying to wash their hands regularly with soap or rub them with hand sanitizer being freely distributed by the government. Social distancing is being observed in public and work places.

**Q.10. How is this epidemic different from the past epidemics? Can you elaborate on the last few epidemics faced by Bhutan?**

A. The COVID-19 is unique from the past pandemic that Bhutan experienced which poses the existential threat to the tiny Himalayan nation. If we don't take preventive measures it will be hard to contain if few dozens of our population are affected by the pandemic.

Although the past response to pandemic has been very effective, Bhutan cannot take chances on this current pandemic. In April 2019, Bhutan experienced the outbreak of bird flu (H5N1). However, the outbreak was stopped at the source with no risk to human. During the outbreak of swine flu or AH1N1 virus in 2009 in Asia, Bhutan tested four positive cases. There were no deaths from the pandemic then.

**Q.11. How did the people fight those epidemics? Can you trace some similarities and differences in citizen's response to past pandemics and this pandemic?**

A. The Bhutanese government responded effectively to prevent, contain and treat the epidemics in the past. People are well informed on the incidences of the epidemics and took preventive measures. However, in the past people were not very serious about personal hygienic behaviours because past epidemics did not kill many humans. COVID-19 has really affected all sections of the society seeing the huge number of deaths worldwide.

**Q.12. Social distancing is a major step which has been suggested across the world to fight this? Is social distancing possible in Bhutan?**

A. Yes, social distancing is being put to practice in Bhutan. All public and work places have been guided by such distancing rules. People are asked to follow the rules strictly. Bhutan's social fabric is still intact where people usually gather in family and groups. This time people are not giving any chance for the pandemic to destroy that fabric.

**Q.13. What are the major steps taken by the people?**

A. People have followed the government advisory sincerely to lock themselves up in their homes and limit their movements to only emergencies. Some people have stocked up the food supplies enough for few months. The once hustle and bustle in the towns and cities have dramatically gone quiet.

**Q.14. What are the steps asked by the King and the government to limit the spread of COVID19?**

A. Our King is our saviour. He has been in the frontline responding to the situation, of course, with calm and compassion. Our king has granted Kidu or welfare to the people of the country by waiving off all loan installments for three months from April-June, 2020. His Majesty has

assured the people not to worry. The King has commanded to institute a National Resilience Fund of Nu 30B (INR 30 billion) to fund the measures being taken to counter the pandemic. People living across the border in cheap apartments are moved back into the country providing temporary shelters and food supplies. Bhutanese infected abroad, like in US, are kept in apartments rented by the Bhutanese government, upon the advice of the King. And the King has been relentless in preparing for any emergency that might befall if the situation aggravates.

The Royal Government of Bhutan has been proactive too in responding to the pandemic. The Prime Minister of Bhutan is leading the government actions towards preventing, containing and treating the pandemic cases in the country. A special team has been formed to work on strategies to develop national response to the pandemic.

Health measures are drastically implemented. Free hand sanitizers are freely distributed. Rapid testing is being carried out. Strict quarantine and surveillance are observed. Large number of Bhutanese returning from abroad are being quarantined in hotels where government is providing free accommodation, food and testing of the people. Special national flights are chartered to repatriate the Bhutanese back home from various regions around the world. Massive communication campaign is being carried out to keep the people well informed about the disease and what people need to do. Inflation is being controlled. Food supplies are stocked to ensure few months of supply if national lockdown needs to imposed. Affected public and private industries are brought under the government's financial support. Since educational institutions are being closed from the beginning of March this year, massive online learning facilities are being developed to keep students engaged while at home.

**Q.15. Has Bhutan also witnessed internal migration as service especially tourism industry is now closed?**

A. Well, there aren't much internal migration as people who have lost their jobs are being provided unemployment benefits under the welfare scheme instituted by the King. Although tourism and hospitality industry are affected the most, the industry is receiving lot of support from the government to sustain through such difficult times. A lot of young people who used to work in the industry are being engaged in meaningful trainings to prevent them wasting their time.

**Q.16. Can you elaborate on the border management (about?) issues in a slight detail. (The movement of migrants to be specific).**

A. Well, borders are sealed from third week of March. Bhutanese returning from abroad are admitted into the country to be quarantined before letting them go home. Bhutan is heavily reliant on import from India for many goods and services. For instance, there are thousands of Indian workers present in Bhutan working in construction industry. Our government have given them option to either stay back or go home. Some laborers have chosen to stay back. Few mischievous behaviours like smuggling in illegal substances are being detected at borders and discouraged. Most importantly, some thousands of Bhutanese living across the border in Indian towns renting cheap apartments are being repatriated into the country providing them temporary accommodation under the King's command.

**Q.17. The economy is likely to be affected the most. There is a major economic risk looming wherein the pandemic is assumed to last for as much as 6 months. How long do you think Bhutan can sustain?**

A. The major economic risks are businesses being hit badly resulting in laying off many employees and workers. This might put the whole economic system into crisis. In case of Bhutan, its top economic sector is hydropower. Bhutan sells most of its hydropower output to India. However, tourism, the second highest revenue-generating industry is seriously affected along with other economic sectors. Our King and the government have assured that economy of the country will be taken care through relief funds and stimulus plans to keep the critical sectors afloat. For instance, the government has already materialized Nu 30B to fund all measures being taken to cope up with the impact of the pandemic.

**Q.18. What is one USP or edge which the citizens of Bhutan have which will aid them in fighting the spread of Covid19?**

A. The main USP of Bhutan is its philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH). This philosophy has inculcated a sense of collective responsibility and values in the people to act together to respond to any crisis. The GNH basically is a development philosophy which looks at maximizing emotional and psychological wellbeing besides equitable socio-economic indicators. People are already showing the solidarity by contributing money to the national fund and volunteering to serve in the frontlines of the pandemic. While the secular measures are being taken care by the King and the Government, the religious sector is performing all kinds of rituals to keep the epidemic at bay.

**Q.19. Which country do you feel will be the first to aid Bhutan in the times of crisis? And which might not? As it is affecting global economies, so in the times of Nation First who do you feel will step out to help?**

A. Bhutan's closest and trustworthy ally has been India since the creation of the republic in 1945. India has played crucial role in Bhutan's modernization. Today, India provides everything that Bhutan needs in terms of goods and services through the free trade agreement. We are assured by the Indian government that essential items like medicines and food will continue to flow into Bhutan even during the lockdowns in India during the COVID-19 crisis.

#### **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.