

Our reference: ZA21033



The Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP
Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
King Charles Street
London
SW1A 2AH

7 June 2021

Dear Foreign Secretary,

Urgent Assistance to Covid-hit Nepal

We, the undersigned, are writing to you with regard to the government's response to the current Covid-19 humanitarian crisis in Nepal, where, despite the virus reproduction rate being the highest in the world, the UK has so far failed to provide comprehensive surge support.

We call on you to shift Nepal to the highest priority to combat this crisis and:

1. Work to get vaccines into the country soon as a matter of priority, as well as
2. Urgently provide much-needed medical supplies, including oxygen generators, concentrators and therapeutic drugs.

Situation in Nepal

As you may well be aware, the current Covid-19 surge has overwhelmed the country's already-weak medical infrastructure, leaving the vast majority of the population without medical assistance or oxygen to fight the virus. Indian variant B.1.617.2 is reportedly responsible for 97% of Nepal's cases. Positivity rates are close to 50%, and as high as 90% in some communities. Only 7% of the population has received one vaccine dose, and less than 2% have received both. This is of course not just a disaster for Nepal, but also a threat to the global recovery from Covid-19.

The Government of Nepal, both in the Guardian newspaper and by private communication, has requested immediate delivery of oxygen, vital medical supplies, and vaccines to save lives. In a petition letter to Rt. Hon Dominic Raab last week, over 50 prominent UK figures amplified this call for urgent delivery of life-saving supplies to Nepal. Over 10,000 people have already signed the same petition in less than a week. On May 20, the UN in Nepal made clear the urgency of the situation by announcing the need for 83.7 million USD to combat Covid-19 in the country.

UK's lack of response

We are deeply concerned that when the question of providing support to Nepal has been raised recently in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, the government's response has been to focus on non-emergency efforts related to Nepal, which, while important, will not make a substantial difference in the current crisis.

The 2 million vaccines allocated to Nepal through the COVAX initiative by way of India are not an emergency solution, as you are no doubt aware, as they will now be significantly delayed, as reported by Reuters on May 18 and 19. This has further been confirmed on May 24 with news of a direct communication from COVAX to the Government of Nepal stating delivery will not happen from India before the end of 2021 at the earliest.

Emergency provision of significant numbers of vaccines is key to curbing the infection rate in Nepal, and if this cannot be managed urgently within the COVAX system, then we call on the UK to lead on finding a new way to ensure vaccines are delivered, e.g. including sharing the additional doses of vaccines that are currently stockpiled and expected to go unused in many high-income countries around the world.

The oxygen generator supplied to the Nepal police in early May, while undoubtedly of some help, is clearly not a special response to the current surge, and at 160 oxygen tanks per day is a start, rather than a fix, to the current situation. While vaccines remain the most useful, quickest to deploy, and best value for money intervention, at the same time the emergency provision of substantial oxygen and medical supplies from the UK, as stipulated in the Nepal government's request, is urgently required to alleviate suffering and save lives.

We are very concerned about the delay regarding the sending of emergency medical supplies to Nepal. It is our understanding that 130 cpap ventilators donated from a UK institution are being sent this week on the military flight. While positive, it was our understanding that up to 500 were available. We ask why these further 370 are being withheld, and is there a way to expedite so that these available machines and other essential supplies can be shipped immediately to save lives? Additionally, as the crisis moves from urban centers into rural village areas, thought needs to be given to provide assistance that enhances the capacity of Nepali institutions, in order to ensure relief items effectively reach even the most remote communities.

We welcome the news that UK military experts have flown to Nepal this week, but we are concerned that this is too little, and call on the government to ensure that this will translate into timely and concrete material support. Countries with far fewer ties to Nepal have already taken initiative to provide aid to the nation in the past weeks, including Switzerland, Spain, Australia, and Canada. The UK must step up to what amounts to both its moral and diplomatic obligations.

We have a longstanding friendship with Nepal, most visible in the Gurkha battalions who have stood beside us in many conflicts, and the over 100,000 Brits of Nepali descent, many of whom have written to their MPs in recent weeks wondering why the UK government has not responded to this urgent need with new and timely support. This is Nepal's hour of need. We have provided much support to neighbouring India, and must extend the same to Nepal, who are suffering the same Covid surge, yet with a much weaker medical infrastructure and with no hope of a vaccine programme for many months unless we intervene.

This humanitarian crisis necessitates the immediate attention and action of the UK government. Time is of the essence, and we call on the UK government to act immediately to announce and implement comprehensive Covid-19 support for Nepal.

Signed

Mike Amesbury MP
Kirsty Blackman MP
Sarah Champion MP
Allan Dorans MP
Patrick Grady MP
Neale Hanvey MP
Chris Law MP
Caroline Lucas MP
Kenny MacAskill MP
Stewart McDonald MP
Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP
Tommy Sheppard MP
Zarah Sultana MP
Alison Thewliss MP
Claudia Webbe MP
Mick Whitley MP