

Nepal facing 'medical crisis' as supplies run short

20 November 2015

Bindu Ghimire's chemotherapy appointment is approaching, but supplies of the drugs the 61-year-old desperately needs are in short supply as a political crisis in her native Nepal deepens.

Protests at the border with India have already led to crippling fuel shortages in the landlocked Himalayan nation, and now [medical supplies](#) are also running short.

"So far, the medicine had been available, but the pharmacy is not sure if they can provide it next time," the 61-year-old's son Shashi Shekhar Ghimire told AFP.

"I don't know what I will do if we don't get it," said Ghimire, whose mother has stage two colon cancer and needs a chemotherapy session every 21 days.

"It is getting very difficult."

Nepal is heavily dependent on its giant neighbour for fuel and other supplies, but little cargo has crossed the border since protests against a new constitution broke out in late September.

Demonstrators from the Madhesi ethnic minority have been blockading the main Birgunj crossing ever since, protesting a new constitution they say leaves them politically marginalised.

Movement across other border checkpoints has also slowed to a crawl, prompting fuel rationing and forcing the government to start selling firewood as residents run out of cooking gas.

Who is to blame for all this is a matter of dispute.

Nepal's government accuses India, which has criticised the new constitution, of retaliating with an "unofficial blockade"—a charge New Delhi denies.

"The issues facing Nepal are political in nature.

They are internal to Nepal and the Nepalese leadership has to resolve them through dialogue with agitating parties," said Indian foreign ministry spokesman Vikas Swarup at a recent briefing.

On Friday, protestors in Birgunj threw a petrol bomb on a truck loaded with locally-produced medicines worth about \$20,000, despite an earlier promise that medical supplies would be allowed through.

There were no casualties, but local police said most of the medicines had been destroyed.

Meanwhile, the Nepal Chemists and Druggists Association say around 350 cargo trucks carrying medicines are stranded at the border.

"We are suffering from a shortage of imported life-saving injections and vaccines," said Mrigendra Shrestha, president of the association.

"Medicines are crucial. We are now trying to airlift emergency supplies."

The head of Bir hospital—Nepal's oldest—said both fuel and vital drugs were running short.

"Operations have become difficult without fuel. If this blockade continues, we will have a medical crisis on our hands," Swayam Prakash Pandit told AFP.

'People are suffering'

Landlocked Nepal imports 60 percent of its medicines, and most of them come from India.

Even those that are locally produced have been affected by the political crisis, which comes just months after a devastating earthquake that killed nearly 9,000 people.

Most of the factories are located along the southern

border with India, where protests against the new constitution have been fiercest, and many have been forced to close.

Those that do remain open are struggling with a shortage of raw materials and packaging.

This week, the country's Shahid Gangalal National Heart Centre reduced its daily surgical procedures by 40 percent citing a shortage of supplies.

"Our stocks are going down, we had to cut down our operations to continue providing service," said Dipendra Khadka, the administration chief at the hospital.

Nepal's Red Cross Society (NRCS) resorted to importing blood bags from China after its supplies were stuck at the border.

"The situation is getting from bad to worse. Our supplies will last two weeks now... this problem needs to be resolved," said Dibya Raj Poudel, spokesman for NRCS.

The health ministry said it was exploring alternative ways of getting supplies into the country, including by air.

"We have made a list of essential drugs and the minister is coordinating to reroute the medicines," said spokesman Mahendra Shrestha.

Nepal's Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli has warned that the blockade is having an impact "several times more than the quake".

But several rounds of talks between the government and the protesting parties have failed to reach an agreement.

For people like Ghimire, with immediate medical needs, the situation is becoming desperate.

"In between all this, the people are suffering. Won't anyone take notice?" asked her son.

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