



## Country Report

### *Bhutan*

#### ***Brief Background***

This *working* report summarises the range of measures taken by *Bhutan* in response to the COVID-19 outbreak that can be sourced to a law or policy. As of 04<sup>th</sup> April 2021, there have been 891 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 1 death in Bhutan as reported to the World Health Organization (WHO). For more information, visit the [COVID-19 Law Lab](#).

#### **State of Emergency/Public Health Emergency**

The Secretary, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan activated the Health Emergency Operation Centre (HEOC) of the Ministry of Health (MoH) through an [Executive Order](#) on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2020<sup>1</sup> as an immediate response to WHO's declaration of novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)<sup>2</sup>. The [National Preparedness and Response Plan for Outbreak of Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) prescribes for the activation of HEOC in three scenarios, i.e., declaration of PHEIC by WHO, declaration of Type II & III disaster by National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), or declaration of outbreak or epidemic by Health Emergency Management Committee (HEMC) (the highest decision-making body in MoH during any disaster, emergency, and disease outbreak).<sup>3</sup> The [Health Emergency Disaster and Contingency Plan 2016](#) (HEDCP) provides for the establishment of HEOC as a central facility for the effective administration of emergency response and disaster management in an emergency.<sup>4</sup> HEOC is managed and operated by the Emergency Medical Services Division under the directives of HEMC during times of emergencies and disasters.<sup>5</sup> MoH implemented HEDCP in 2016 to

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<sup>1</sup> Executive Order – Health Emergency Operation Centre (HEOC), MOH/SEC/44/2019-20/10323, 31<sup>st</sup> January 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Statement on the second meeting of the International Health Regulations (2005) Emergency Committee regarding the outbreak of novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV), World Health Organization, 30<sup>th</sup> January 2020.

<sup>3</sup> National Preparedness and Response Plan for Outbreak of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) – 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Health Emergency and Disaster Contingency Plan, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 01<sup>st</sup> January 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

fulfill the mandates of the [Disaster Management Act 2013](#)<sup>6</sup> (DMA) and the [National Health Policy 2012](#)<sup>7</sup> (NHP). DMA is the primary legal instrument entrusted with managing any disaster in Bhutan.<sup>8</sup> While Chapter 10 of DMA provides for the establishment of the Emergency Operation Centre, Section 111 and Section 112 mandate MoH to manage emergency medical services during a disaster.<sup>9</sup> Chapter 6 of DMA instructs agencies notified by NDMA to prepare, implement, review and update emergency contingency plans.<sup>10</sup> The National Health Policy (2012) directs every health facility of the country to institute an appropriate system of care to deal with emergencies, disasters, epidemics, and outbreaks.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, all on-going construction activities and supplies affected by COVID-19 were also declared as [force majeure](#) with effect from 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020.<sup>12</sup>

### **Access to Medicine and Intellectual Property**

Anticipating a surge in unfair trade practices such as price rigging and collusive price fixation of medical equipment or other products meant for prophylactic purposes, the Office of Consumer Protection, Ministry of Economic Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan issued a [public notice](#) on 02<sup>nd</sup> February 2020 refraining business entities dealing in sale and supply of such medical equipment from charging exorbitant prices.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, in wake of the first confirmed COVID-19 case in the country, the ministry issued another [notification](#) to ensure a steady supply of essential goods and services including personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks, gloves, and hand sanitizers.<sup>14</sup>

Section 15 of the [Industrial Property Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2001](#) provides for compulsory licensing.<sup>15</sup> However, the government has not yet resorted to this provision in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Disease Surveillance and Technology**

The Royal Government of Bhutan enacted and implemented numerous laws and policies related to COVID-19 surveillance since January 2020, immediately after WHO notified the

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<sup>6</sup> Disaster Management Act of Bhutan 2013, Parliament of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 18<sup>th</sup> March 2013.

<sup>7</sup> National Health Policy, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 01<sup>st</sup> January 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Disaster Management Act of Bhutan 2013, Parliament of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 18<sup>th</sup> March 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> National Health Policy, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 01<sup>st</sup> January 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Notification – Declaration of Force Majeure, MoF/DNP-14/2019-2020/1219, 08<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Notification, MoEA/OCP/PCD/Public Notice/09/19-20/202, 02<sup>nd</sup> February 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Notification, MoEA/OCP/PCD/Public Notice/09/19-20/256, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020.

<sup>15</sup> The Industrial Property Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2001, Parliament of Bhutan, Royal Government of Bhutan, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2001.

world of a pneumonia outbreak of unknown cause in China. [Thermal fever scanners were launched at Paro International Airport](#) and screening for respiratory ailments began on 15<sup>th</sup> January 2020.<sup>16</sup> On 21<sup>st</sup> January 2020, MoH developed a [National Preparedness and Response Plan](#) (NPRP) in alignment with HEDCP and DMA which was later revised and updated by the Technical Advisory Group and publicly released on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020. The Plan aimed at enhancing the health sector's capacity to strengthen surveillance, detect, control and prevent, respond, investigate and recover from the COVID-19 outbreak in the country.<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs (MoHCA) [instructed](#) law enforcement agencies to establish surveillance procedures at all entry checkpoints and vulnerable border areas.<sup>18</sup> Alternative places to quarantine suspected cases were also identified on 09<sup>th</sup> February 2020.<sup>19</sup>

The [first case of COVID-19 in Bhutan](#) was confirmed on 05<sup>th</sup> March 2020.<sup>20</sup> In response, on 15<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the Royal Centre for Disease Control issued a [protocol for contact tracing](#). The protocol divided contacts into three categories - close, primary, and secondary - and listed procedures for their identification including quarantining of close/primary contacts, laboratory sample collection of primary contacts, and follow-up of secondary contacts.<sup>21</sup> On 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020, MoH released an elaborate [COVID-19 Testing Strategy](#) as guidance for the use of molecular tests (RT-PCR) and rapid antibody tests (RDT).<sup>22</sup> It further delineated directions for testing of different groups - travellers under quarantine, staff in point of entries, primary contacts under quarantine, volunteers manning quarantine facilities, suspects from hospitals or flu clinics, health workers after managing confirmed cases, health workers working in flu clinic, routine healthcare, observation and holding areas, random samples of test drivers, and high-risk community along borders.<sup>23</sup> On 15<sup>th</sup> April 2020, MoH issued [a strategy for engaging high-risk communities for COVID-19 prevention & control](#) to devise targeted interventions. The strategy outlined the procedure for high-risk community mapping and intervention strategies to be adopted thereafter, such as promoting community engagement, improving risk

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<sup>16</sup> Cautionary Notification, MOH/SEC/44/2019-20/9552, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2020.

<sup>17</sup> National Preparedness and Response Plan for Outbreak of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) – 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Setting up Surveillance of Corona-virus (nCoV) at Checkpoints, NGH/SEC-31/2019-2020/389, 12<sup>th</sup> February 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Setting up Surveillance of Corona-virus (nCoV) at Checkpoints, NGH/SEC-31/2019-2020/389, 12<sup>th</sup> February 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Press Release – First confirmed COVID-19 case in Bhutan, Prime Minister's Office, Royal Government of Bhutan, 6<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Protocol for Contact Tracing of COVID-19, Version 1.00 - Royal Centre for Disease Control, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

<sup>22</sup> COVID-19 Testing Strategy, Version 1 – Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

communication, enhancing community surveillance, and community support services and guidelines for their implementation and monitoring.<sup>24</sup> To further expedite contact tracing, the Royal Government of Bhutan developed two applications- the [Druk Trace \(for surveillance of local transmission of the disease\)](#)<sup>25</sup> and [Stay Home \(for surveillance of quarantine individuals only\)](#)<sup>26</sup>. The Druk Trace App was restricted to only collecting phone numbers of individuals to effectively carry out surveillance. The Stay Home App focused on monitoring and providing support to individuals under quarantine.

To enhance the disease detection capacity, MoH issued [an environment and social management framework for COVID-19 emergency response and health systems preparedness](#) on May 2020 for implementation of the National Preparedness and Response Plan (NPRP) for COVID-19.<sup>27</sup> On 19<sup>th</sup> May 2020, the MoH issued a [protocol for COVID-19 confirmed cases and close contacts abroad](#) to enhance the monitoring and testing of close contacts of confirmed cases.<sup>28</sup> The protocol forbid such cases from travelling to Bhutan till they tested negative.<sup>29</sup> On 21<sup>st</sup> May 2020, MoH issued guidance on [prevention & control of COVID-19 in elderly people](#). This guideline was intended for healthcare workers and other volunteers who provided healthcare and other essential services to elderly people at home residence, health facility or community setting.<sup>30</sup> On 02<sup>nd</sup> July 2020, MoH issued a [protocol for testing for COVID-19 medical certification and travel](#) to facilitate international travel by issuing a uniform COVID-19 test certificate with [fit to travel certificate](#)<sup>31</sup> in the prescribed format as per the requirements of the country being travelled to.<sup>32</sup>

From 03<sup>rd</sup> July 2020, [MoH started levying minimal costs for all COVID-19 tests](#).<sup>33</sup> A standard reporting mechanism, i.e., [SEP \(Security, Economy, and Preparedness\) System](#) was

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<sup>24</sup> Strategy for Engaging High-Risk Communities for COVID Prevention & Control, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Announcement – Launch of Druk Trace App, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Announcement – Stay Home App, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 01<sup>st</sup> April 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Environment and Social Management Framework for COVID-19 Emergency Response and Health Systems Preparedness Project, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Protocol for COVID-19 confirmed cases and close contacts abroad, MOH/SEC/44/2019-20/12994, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Guidance on Prevention & Control of COVID-19 in Elderly People, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition – Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 21<sup>st</sup> May 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Notification – Issuance of System Based Fit to Fly Certificate, MoH/COVID-19/2020/2637, 10<sup>th</sup> November 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Protocol for Testing of People for COVID-19 Medical Certification and Travel, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition – Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 02<sup>nd</sup> July 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Executive Order, MOH/SEC/44/2020-21/50, 02<sup>nd</sup> July 2020.

operationalized on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2020 to ensure efficient and systematic surveillance of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.<sup>34</sup> On 29<sup>th</sup> August 2020, MoH issued the [frontline responders' safety guidelines](#) to reduce the risk faced by frontline workers and ensure their welfare during the national lockdown. Frontline workers were classified into active and passive and their risk profiling was based on the presence or absence of community transmission in their respective areas of operation.<sup>35</sup>

On 02<sup>nd</sup> September 2020, the MoH issued a [protocol for the containment of the COVID-19 outbreak in a cluster and surveillance zone](#) which was endorsed by the National Task Force for COVID-19.<sup>36</sup> To facilitate fast and accurate contact tracing, the Department of IT & Telecom developed a Check Post Management System and issued a [standard operating procedure for maintaining data on the movement of passengers and vehicles through the Check Post Management System](#).<sup>37</sup> On the 15<sup>th</sup> of September, 2020 the MoH issued a [protocol for COVID-19 management for VVIPs](#). As per this protocol, RT-PCR was to be adopted for all officers, troops and attendants with immediate contact with the VVIPs and a Rapid antibody test (RDT) was to be used for all duty officials and family members in the surrounding areas.<sup>38</sup>

Starting 01<sup>st</sup> October 2020, the National COVID-19 Task Force [required](#) individuals to pay for facility quarantine and bear the costs of RT-PCR tests. However, the government continued to support rooms, basic meals and the cost of RT-PCR tests taking into consideration that not all travellers can afford to pay.<sup>39</sup> On 10<sup>th</sup> December 2020, MoH released another exhaustive national COVID-19 testing protocol that was divided into five sections- mandatory testing for individuals entering Bhutan, additional testing for individuals entering Bhutan, testing for discharge from de-isolation, testing of travellers from high risk to low-risk areas, and testing of high-risk frontline workers.<sup>40</sup>

In wake of increasing COVID-19 cases, the National COVID-19 Taskforce issued a revised [protocol on 08<sup>th</sup> January 2021](#) to prevent the spread of disease beyond Thimphu and Paro.<sup>41</sup> As

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<sup>34</sup> Executive Order, PM/PS/Executive Orders/001, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Frontline Responders' Safety Guidelines, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 29<sup>th</sup> August 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Protocol for the Containment of COVID-19 outbreak in a Cluster and Surveillance Zone, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition – Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 02<sup>nd</sup> September 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Standard Operating Procedure for maintenance of data on movement of passengers and vehicles through Check Post Management System, Royal Government of Bhutan, 11<sup>th</sup> September 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Protocol for COVID-19 Management for VVIPs, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition - Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 15<sup>th</sup> September 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Notification, NTCF/01/100, 26<sup>th</sup> September 2020.

<sup>40</sup> National COVID-19 Testing Protocol, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 10<sup>th</sup> December 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Press Release: Protocol for Stranded Individuals, Prime Minister's Office, Royal Government of Bhutan, 08<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

per the latest [testing guidelines](#) for primary contacts under home quarantine issued on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021, 1<sup>st</sup> RT-PCR test shall be undertaken between Day 3-5, 2<sup>nd</sup> RT-PCR test between Day 13-14 and 3<sup>rd</sup> RT-PCR Test along with Rapid Antibody Test between Day 21-22 from the last date of contact with a confirmed case.<sup>42</sup> On 06<sup>th</sup> February 2021, MoH issued an enhanced surveillance strategy for COVID-19 that was divided into three categories- active surveillance in high-risk areas, active surveillance in low-risk districts, and passive surveillance for both high-risk and low-risk areas and mandated compulsory testing every two weeks for all identified frontline workers with the exception of healthcare workers.<sup>43</sup>

### **HIV and COVID-19**

During June-November 2020, the MoH [reported](#) 20 new HIV cases. In response, the Director, Department of Public Health, Dr. Karma Lhazeen suggested seriously applying the 3Ts of COVID-19 (Test, Treat and Track) to overcome AIDS. The MoH also announced the rolling out of HIV Self Testing in six major urban districts.

### **Isolation and Quarantine Measures**

Bhutan began [screening for COVID-19 at entry points](#) in January 2020 and suspected cases were quarantined in isolation facilities starting February 2020<sup>44</sup>. [Quarantine and isolation for all travellers \(both symptomatic and asymptomatic\) was made mandatory beginning 14<sup>th</sup> March 2020](#)<sup>45</sup> after the declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic by WHO on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020<sup>46</sup>. All asymptomatic travellers were advised mandatory home quarantine for 14 days from the day of arrival into the country while all symptomatic travellers were prescribed to be tested and treated at a hospital isolation ward if they tested positive or were advised mandatory home quarantine if they tested negative.<sup>47</sup> A surveillance team from MoH was mandated to closely follow up on all such cases of home quarantine.<sup>48</sup> Several standard operating procedures were issued for

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<sup>42</sup> Duration of Quarantine and Testing Details for Primary Contacts under Home Quarantine, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Enhanced Surveillance Strategy for COVID-19, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 06<sup>th</sup> February 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Setting up Surveillance of Corona-virus (nCoV) at Checkpoints, NGH/SEC-31/2019-2020/389, 12<sup>th</sup> February 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Notification, (3)DMS/EMSD/COVID/2020/11562, 14<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Virtual Press Conference on COVID-19, World Health Organization, 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Notification, (3)DMS/EMSD/COVID/2020/11562, 14<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.



[home quarantine](#)<sup>49</sup>, [facility quarantine](#)<sup>50</sup>, and [designed hotel quarantine](#)<sup>51</sup>. [Facility quarantine was made mandatory for Bhutanese travellers](#) with effect from 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 because of non-compliance of home quarantine rules.<sup>52</sup> Subsequently, the [quarantine period was extended from 14 to 21 days](#)<sup>53</sup> and on 30<sup>th</sup> March, 2020 the MoH released a detailed [procedure to be followed for the release of individuals from quarantine](#).<sup>54</sup> MoH also issued an updated [Guidance and SOP on Quarantine for COVID-19](#) on 19<sup>th</sup> April 2020 which reiterated the mandatory quarantine duration of 21 days either from the date of last contact with the COVID-19 confirmed case or from the date of arrival into the country, where day one was to be considered as zero.<sup>55</sup>

To ensure strict compliance with quarantine protocols, the MoH [identified what would amount to violations of the rules and laid down the liabilities](#) to be imposed.<sup>56</sup> Failure to comply with the mandatory quarantine rules attracted penalties as offences of [criminal nuisance as per Section 410 of the Penal Code \(Amendment\) Act, 2011](#)<sup>57</sup>; [breach of public order and tranquillity as per Section 448 of the Penal Code of Bhutan, 2004](#)<sup>58</sup>; and [failure to assist lawful authority as per Section 428 of the Penal Code of Bhutan, 2004](#)<sup>59</sup>. To limit and contain the spread of COVID-19 infection from the high-risk to low-risk areas, the MoH on 02<sup>nd</sup> September 2020 with endorsement of the National COVID-19 Task Force issued [testing and quarantine protocol for people travelling out of high-risk areas](#).<sup>60</sup> The protocol provided for a mandatory 7-day quarantine at a designated facility at the origin of the journey for all routine travellers after which RT-PCR test was prescribed to be carried out on Day 8. Individuals were allowed to travel directly from the quarantine facility within 24 hours after the negative test results. In case of a positive result, they were to be shifted to an isolation ward/facility. As an exception,

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<sup>49</sup> SOP for Home Quarantine for COVID-19, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

<sup>50</sup> SOP for Quarantine at Designated Facility for COVID-19, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

<sup>51</sup> SOP for Quarantine at the Designated Hotel for COVID-19, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Notification – Mandatory Facility Quarantine for Bhutanese travellers, MOH/COVID-19/2019-2020/7659, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Letter from the Prime Minister to our friends in Quarantine, Prime Minister, Royal Government of Bhutan, 30<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Notification – Procedure to release people from quarantine, MOH/COVID-19/2019-2020/49, 30<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

<sup>55</sup> Guidance & SOP on Quarantine for COVID-19, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 19<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Notification – Do's and Don'ts at a Quarantine Facility, MOH/COVID-19/2019-20/79, 01<sup>st</sup> May 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Penal Code (Amendment) Act of Bhutan 2011, Parliament of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 5<sup>th</sup> July 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Penal Code of Bhutan 2004, Parliament of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 11<sup>th</sup> August 2004.

<sup>59</sup> Penal Code of Bhutan 2004, Parliament of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 11<sup>th</sup> August 2004.

<sup>60</sup> Testing and Quarantine Protocol for People Travelling out of High-risk Areas, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition – Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 02<sup>nd</sup> September 2020.

emergency travellers were allowed to travel with appropriate health advisories if rapid antigen test produced negative results.<sup>61</sup> As of 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021, all primary contacts of positive cases are required to undergo [self-quarantine at home for 21 days](#).<sup>62</sup>

## **Movement and Distance Restrictions**

MoH issued its first [travel advisory](#) on 25<sup>th</sup> January 2020.<sup>63</sup> Subsequently, the general public was advised to [avoid/postpone travel](#) until the outbreak was officially contained.<sup>64</sup> After the first reported COVID-19 case in the country, [entry of foreign tourists was restricted for two weeks](#) beginning 06<sup>th</sup> March 2020.<sup>65</sup> [All mass gatherings were deferred](#)<sup>66</sup> and the [issuance of new passports suspended](#)<sup>67</sup> till further directives. [All schools and youth centres were closed](#) with effect from 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020.<sup>68</sup> [All international border crossings were closed](#) with effect from 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 except allowing foreigners to exit and permitting Bhutanese to enter the country subject to medical screening and a mandatory two-week quarantine at a designated facility.<sup>69</sup> Several [restraints were imposed by the government on public gatherings, travel, business and entertainment, games and sports, and civil service, corporate, private, and other agencies](#) to prevent the spread of the disease.<sup>70</sup> On 06<sup>th</sup> April 2020, MoH issued a [travel advisory](#) mandating physical distancing of 1 meter.<sup>71</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan started [special flights for evacuation of Bhutanese from abroad](#) beginning 09<sup>th</sup> April 2020.<sup>72</sup>

On 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020, MoH issued [guidance on response during Stage Orange+ and Red Stage](#).<sup>73</sup>

On 01<sup>st</sup> July 2020, [face Masks were made mandatory](#) for everyone visiting hospitals/schools/institutes and for select service providers such as public transport drivers,

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Duration of Quarantine and Testing Details for Primary Contacts under Home Quarantine, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Travel Advisory pertaining to 2019-nCoV Outbreak in China, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Travel Advisory, PPD/PPMS-26/2019-2020/7049, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Press Release: COVID-19 Update Notification, Tourism Council of Bhutan, Royal Government of Bhutan, 06<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Notification, Tha(01)/2020/2136, 06<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

<sup>67</sup> Notification, MFA/DoP/PD-03/2020/14, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Notification, MoE/EEOC/(1)/2020/551, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

<sup>69</sup> Public Notification, NGH/SEC-33/2020/70, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2020.

<sup>70</sup> Press Release, Prime Minister's Office, Royal Government of Bhutan, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Travel Advisory on Prevention of COVID-19 issued by the Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 06<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

<sup>72</sup> Notification on Special Flights for Evacuation of Bhutanese from Abroad, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan, 08<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

<sup>73</sup> Guidance on response during Stage Orange+ and Red stage, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020.



vegetable vendors selling vegetables in government designated vegetable markets, and banking service providers who were at risk of direct public contact.<sup>74</sup>

While MoH discouraged mass gatherings, [guidance for unavoidable mass gatherings](#) was issued on 08<sup>th</sup> July 2020 to prevent or mitigate community transmission of COVID-19.<sup>75</sup> The use of face mask was made mandatory throughout such mass gatherings.<sup>76</sup>

On August 08 2020 the MoH issued [guidelines for lockdown](#) which provided parameters for categorisation of areas of transmission into three zones, i.e., red (infected zone), yellow (surveillance zone), and green (disease-free zone). These zones were to be identified within a specified time (24-48 hours) through aggressive investigation (3T- Tracing, Testing, and Treating Strategy).<sup>77</sup> On 11<sup>th</sup> August 2020, the [first national lockdown](#) of the country was imposed for 21 days.<sup>78</sup> Stay-at-home orders were issued for the general public and all schools, institutions, offices, and commercial establishments were closed. MoH also issued [guidelines for health facilities during lockdown](#)<sup>79</sup> and [protocol for availing essential health services during the lockdown](#)<sup>80</sup> on 14<sup>th</sup> August 2020. [Teleconsultation services](#) were encouraged by the government during the lockdown period.<sup>81</sup>

Any violations of the lockdown protocols attracted prosecution as per section 410 of the [Penal Code of Bhutan](#).<sup>82</sup>

The [unlocking of the first nationwide lockdown](#) was done in three phases beginning 01<sup>st</sup> September 2020.<sup>83</sup> This notification from the Prime Minister's Office also reinforced the mandatory requirement of wearing face masks by making them compulsory for everyone.<sup>84</sup> However, no technical specifications for the types of masks were prescribed by the government.

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<sup>74</sup> Notification, MoH/DMS/47/2019-20/86/14294, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Guidance of Unavoidable Mass Gathering, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition - Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 08<sup>th</sup> July 2020.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Guidelines for Lockdown for COVID-19 Containment, v6 – Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 08<sup>th</sup> August 2020.

<sup>78</sup> Press Release: Government announces nationwide lockdown, Prime Minister's Office, Royal Government of Bhutan, 11<sup>th</sup> August 2020.

<sup>79</sup> Notification, MOH/SEC/31/2020/1042, 14<sup>th</sup> August 2020.

<sup>80</sup> Update: Essential Health Services, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 14<sup>th</sup> August 2020.

<sup>81</sup> Public Notice, Royal Government of Bhutan, 14<sup>th</sup> August 2020.

<sup>82</sup> Penal Code (Amendment) Act of Bhutan 2011, Parliament of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 5<sup>th</sup> July 2011.

<sup>83</sup> Press Release: Initiating the Unlocking Phases, Prime Minister's Office, Royal Government of Bhutan, 31<sup>st</sup> August 2020.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

From 05<sup>th</sup> September 2020, a [COVID-19 negative certificate](#) was made mandatory for all individuals wishing to travel into Bhutan.<sup>85</sup> [Air Travel Bubble Arrangement](#) was agreed between the Royal Government of Bhutan and the Government of India on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2020 to facilitate flight operations between the two countries till the resumption of normal international flights.<sup>86</sup>

The [second nationwide lockdown](#) was enforced on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2020 following community transmission in the national capital, Thimphu.<sup>87</sup> All districts were instructed to activate and ensure smooth implementation of the zoning system.<sup>88</sup> All schools, institutions, offices, and business establishments were closed but designated shops within the zones and essential services were permitted. The [seven-day lockdown was extended](#) on 29<sup>th</sup> December 2020.<sup>89</sup> Following the Prime Minister's announcement on second nationwide lockdown, [work from home protocol was immediately activated by the Royal Civil Service Commission](#).<sup>90</sup> The National COVID-19 Task Force rolled out [measures to ease the second nationwide lockdown](#) starting 06<sup>th</sup> January 2021.<sup>91</sup> On 15<sup>th</sup> January 2021, [18 dzongkhags \(districts\) out of 20 were allowed to unlock from existing restrictions](#) while respecting the COVID-19 norms that prevailed before the lockdown.<sup>92</sup> For the national capital, Thimphu, the [complete unlocking process](#) began on 01<sup>st</sup> February 2021.<sup>93</sup>

The [National COVID-19 Task Force restricted the movement of travellers during the vaccination week](#) beginning 27<sup>th</sup> March 2021 and authorized dzongkhag (district) administrations and Royal Bhutan Police to facilitate travel on a case-to-case basis subject to the issued instructions.<sup>94</sup>

## **Vaccine**

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<sup>85</sup> Notification, MoH/COVID/2020/139, 05<sup>th</sup> September 2020.

<sup>86</sup> Public Notification on the Air Travel Bubble Arrangement, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan, 18<sup>th</sup> September 2020.

<sup>87</sup> Press Release – Second Nationwide Lockdown, Prime Minister's Office, Royal Government of Bhutan, 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2020.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Press Release – Extension of Nationwide Lockdown, Prime Minister's Office, Royal Government of Bhutan, 29<sup>th</sup> December 2020.

<sup>90</sup> Notification, RCSC/LD-57/2020/1426, 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2020.

<sup>91</sup> Press Release – Easing Nationwide Lockdown, Prime Minister's Office, Royal Government of Bhutan, 04<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

<sup>92</sup> Press Release – Unlocking the 18 Dzongkhags, Prime Minister's Office, Royal Government of Bhutan, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

<sup>93</sup> Press Release – Unlocking Thimphu and beyond starting Monday, Prime Minister's Office, Royal Government of Bhutan, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

<sup>94</sup> Travel Notification during COVID-19 Vaccination, NC19TF/01/263, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2021.

[The Medicines Act 2003](#)<sup>95</sup> and the [Bhutan Medicines Rules and Regulation 2019](#)<sup>96</sup> provide for the legal basis and framework for the regulation of medicinal products including vaccines in Bhutan. On 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021, the Drug Regulatory Authority (DRA) through a [regulatory notification](#)<sup>97</sup> issued the [Emergency Use Authorization \(EUA\) procedure and conditions for Deployment of COVID-19 Vaccines](#)<sup>98</sup>. This document outlined the regulatory role of DRA in emergency use listing, imports, lot release and post-marketing surveillance of COVID-19 vaccines.<sup>99</sup> The [Covishield vaccine, manufactured by Serum Institute of India was the first COVID-19 vaccine to be approved for emergency use in the country](#).<sup>100</sup> As of 19<sup>th</sup> March 2021, [three vaccines had been granted emergency use authorization in Bhutan](#)- Pfizer-BioNTech, Covishield, and BBIBP-CorV.<sup>101</sup>

Bhutan's vaccination plan for COVID-19 is guided by the [National Immunization Policy and Strategic Guidelines, 2011](#).<sup>102</sup> The National Immunization Technical Advisory Group advises MoH on all technical matters related to immunization, including COVID-19 vaccines. The Vaccine Preventable Disease Program, MoH is authorized to provide timely updates to the general public on COVID-19 vaccination.

Bhutan started its [mass rollout of vaccinations on 27<sup>th</sup> March 2021](#).<sup>103</sup> The vaccines are provided free of cost by the Royal Government of Bhutan to all eligible individuals who are 18 years and above irrespective of their nationality. Although not mandatory, the MoH strongly recommends all eligible individuals get vaccinated. To ensure that every eligible resident gets vaccinated, the MoH adopted a [home-based vaccination strategy](#) for individuals with mobility issues and for the elderly.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> The Medicines Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan 2003, National Assembly of Kingdom of Bhutan, 05<sup>th</sup> August 2003.

<sup>96</sup> Bhutan Medicines Rules and Regulation 2019, Drug Regulatory Authority, Royal Kingdom of Bhutan, 01<sup>st</sup> November 2019.

<sup>97</sup> Regulatory Notification, Drug Controller – Drug Regulatory Authority, Royal Government of Bhutan, 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

<sup>98</sup> Emergency Use Authorization procedure and conditions for Deployment of COVID-19 Vaccines, DRA-G-D3-RP-08, 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Press Brief, Drug Regulatory Authority, Royal Government of Bhutan, 21<sup>st</sup> January 2020.

<sup>101</sup> Summary of COVID-19 vaccines with Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) in Bhutan, Drug Regulatory Authority, Royal Government of Bhutan, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2021.

<sup>102</sup> National Immunization Policy and Strategic Guidelines, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 01<sup>st</sup> January 2011.

<sup>103</sup> Day One: Nationwide Vaccination Campaign, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2021.

<sup>104</sup> Announcement – Home Based Vaccination Strategy, Ministry of Health, Royal Government of Bhutan, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2021.

## **Misinformation**

The general public was advised against spreading any kind of false or misleading messages during the COVID-19 pandemic. A violation attracted a penalty under the Information, Communications and Media Act of Bhutan 2018.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Information, Communications and Media Act of Bhutan 2018, Parliament of Bhutan, Royal Kingdom of Bhutan, 08<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

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