

Kathmandu, Nepal - UPF-South Asia's webinar: Tackling Pandemic Issues

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Kathmandu, Nepal -- UPF-South Asia organized its first "Peace Talks" webinar on "Tackling Issues Related to the Pandemic and How We Can Bring Different Solutions in This Time," which focused on the Maldives, on May 26, 2020. The virtual conference was about one hour-long.

The moderator, UPF-South Asia director, Mr. Santosh Kumar Paudel, introduced the panelists, and afterwards all the participants greeted each other.

The conference began with UPF-Asia Pacific chair, Hon. Ek Nath Dhakal, giving an update on UPF's worldwide activities. Recent events include the World Summit 2020, which was held in Korea in February and the "Peace Talks" webinar series UPF International initiated in April with a webinar titled, "A Circle of Light: Moving Through and Beyond the Coronavirus Crisis." Since the series launch, national and regional "Peace Talks" have been held, he also said, and encouraged the participants from the Maldives to hold virtual conferences in the future. Hon. Dhakal additionally spoke about activities the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP) and the relief distribution efforts UPF has carried out -- and encouraged all the attendees to actively participate in this platform to share best practices in order to overcome the pandemic. He also highlighted four best practices during this time: unity, cooperation, dialogue and compassion.

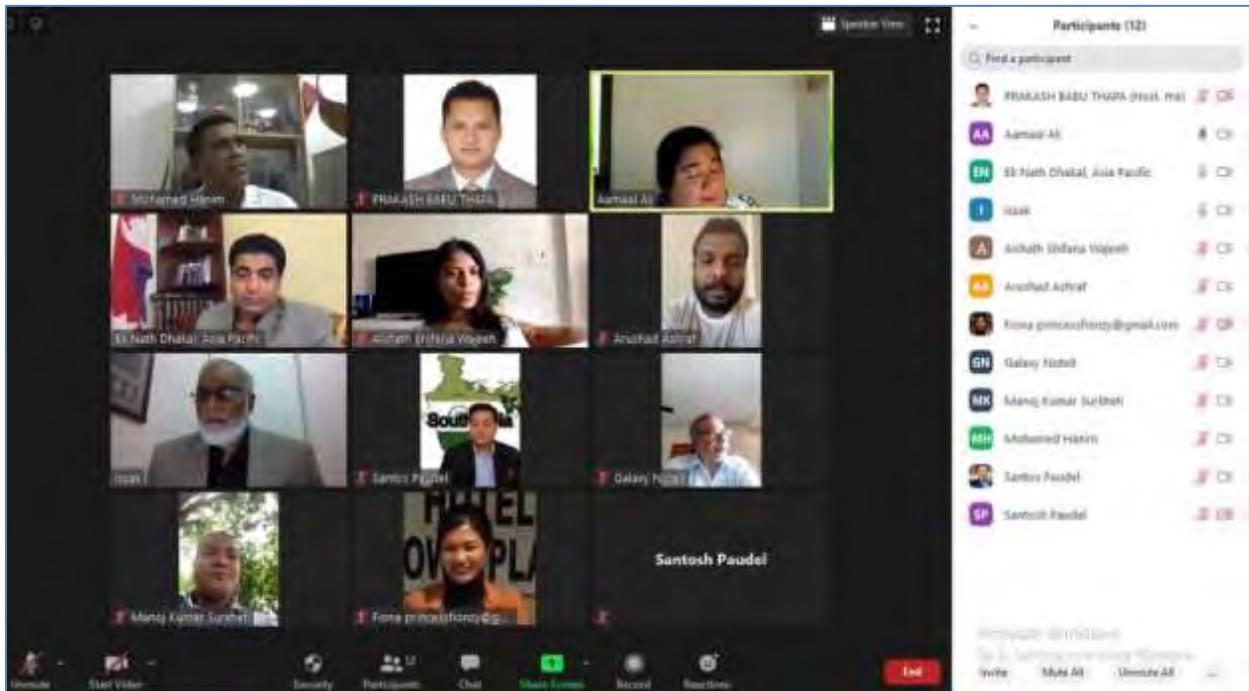
UPF-Maldives representative and former deputy minister of home affairs of the Maldives, Mr. Mohamed Hanim, said the economy of the small island nation, which relies heavily on the tourism sector, has been devastated by the pandemic, which he likened to a tsunami hitting the country. He suggested that the government look at "diversification" to strengthen the agricultural and fisheries sectors. He also mentioned the government's timely response to the pandemic and said that it seems measures that have been taken were flattening the curve. And, that this is the reason the government will begin easing the lockdown in a few days. He also expressed his gratitude to all the frontline workers, such as healthcare practitioners and their tireless efforts to keep everyone safe.

Former minister of gender, family and social services of the Maldives, Dr. Aamal Ali, who currently lives in America but is well aware of the situation in the Maldives, raised the question: "How [can we] create the new normal" once the lockdown is lifted? Furthermore, how can the disease be prevented in the capital, which is densely populated with a population of 300,000, and people still have healthy relationships with each other? Can discipline be instilled for social distancing measures? As we go forward, how can we learn from other countries such as Italy, Japan and Korea, and regions such as Hong Kong?

The commissioner of the Elections Commission in the Maldives, Hon. Fuzad Thowfeek, gave recent data on and a comparative analysis of COVID-19 cases in South Asian countries. He said Nepal, the Maldives, Bhutan and Sri Lanka have been successful in containing the spread of the virus in terms of the number of fatalities from the virus. He also said that due to face mask shortages, it is imperative masks be given to poor communities to protect them.

Former ambassador Shaheed Ibrahim Zaki underscored that the Maldives is heavily dependent on the

tourism industry and revenue from it has vastly decreased because of the lockdown. He also praised the government's swift and sweeping actions to fight the pandemic, which included setting up quarantine facilities. He urged unity within the country and acknowledged Dr. Aamal's question on how to solve the crisis. No single country can tackle the pandemic alone, and as such the Maldives should look at how other countries like Yemen, Libya and Afghanistan have addressed it. As people build their lives and industries are built, we have to go back to basics. As the pandemic is a socio-economic problem, people have to get involved. He concluded by saying he hopes for the best.



Youth leader and senior executive director at the Ministry of Home Affairs of the Maldives, Mr. Arushad Ashraf, shared his experience at the emergency operations center. He is helping managing expatriates who are stranded in the country and the quarantine facilities. He mentioned that it has been a challenging time and that he has encountered many difficulties doing his job. He is hopeful that when the lockdown eases in few days, everyone will still be cautious in the "new normal" and wear masks and practice social distancing.

Entrepreneur and fitness advocate, Ms. Shifana Waheed, commended the government for managing the crisis and said, in the densely populated capital, it is important strict health guidelines, such as hand sanitizing and social distancing, are followed. The collapse of the economy has affected small and medium enterprises, which comprise 80 percent of the economy. She conjectured how the government can revive and sustain the country's businesses since it does not have the means to support them. She also said that while support was given to the tourism sector, all other industries should be supported as well. Ms. Waheed pointed out that youth are a big untapped resource and suggested the country consider how to utilize them. She expressed her hope to see the country be built again with a unified and positive outlook.

Mr. Manoj Kumar Surkheta and his wife Fiona gave their greetings.

The virtual conference closed with Hon. Dhakal also noting that the stopping of tourism has contributed to unemployment and a drop in revenue. He also acknowledged that once the lockdown has eased, people will have to move on with the "new normal."