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Nepal: Human rights crucial at dangerous political crossroads

Ten years into Nepal's civil war, both parties to the conflict must be guided by their human rights obligations if Nepal is to make it safely through this dangerous political crossroads, said Amnesty International today at a press conference following a mission to the country from 20-23 March.

"Ordinary people are suffering terrible losses every day as the fighting grinds on," said Purna Sen, director of the Asia-Pacific Programme. "Meanwhile, women in particular are often the unrecognized victims in this conflict and have limited access to protection and justice," she said.

The delegation met with two leaders of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) to urge that public pledges to respect human rights, including commitments made in a written agreement with the alliance of seven leading political parties, translate into concrete action on the ground to protect civilians and respect international humanitarian law. Amnesty International raised serious concerns over the abduction and recruitment of children by the CPN (Maoist) and over the large number of people forced to flee from their homes due to threats, extortion, and violence by Maoist cadres.

"International pressure so far has helped to curb some of the worst violations committed by the security forces but the fundamental problem of impunity for human rights violations has not been addressed," said Kate Allen, director of Amnesty International UK. "Even as the number of new reports of 'disappearances' at the hands of the security forces fell over the past year, hundreds of cases remain unresolved and are the source of ongoing anguish for the victims' family and friends."

"Families of the 'disappeared' deserve answers immediately to their repeated demands for information about the fate of their loved ones. Above all they deserve justice," said Kate Allen.

Security force personnel who have been prosecuted for human rights violations have received disproportionately light sentences that cannot be seen to have delivered justice and which are unlikely to have any deterrent effect.

Amnesty International called for the immediate and unconditional release of the nine political party and civil society activists who remain in detention more than two months after the government initiated a renewed crackdown earlier this year. The delegates visited prisoners of conscience Krishna Pahadi, a leader of the Citizens Movement for Democracy and Peace (CMDP) and former chair of AI Nepal, and Shyam Shrestha, editor of the intellectual weekly *Mulyankan* and also a CMDP activist, who are being held at the Armed Police Force Barracks No. 2 at Ranibari, in Maharajgunj, Kathmandu. Other prisoners of conscience include CMDP leaders Dr. Mathura Prasad Shrestha, Dr. Devendra Raj Pandey, and

political party leaders Madhav Kumar Nepal (general secretary of the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist)), Ram Chandra Poudel (general secretary, Nepali Congress), Nara Hari Acharya (central committee member, Nepali Congress), Mahadev Gurung (Nepali Congress), and Hridayesh Tripathi (Nepal Sadbhawana Party, Ananda Devi group).

Amnesty International also condemned yesterday's raid on the home of UML leader Madhav Kumar Nepal, who is under house arrest, in which around 10 members of the Armed Police Force reportedly searched the premises and seized telephones, computers, fax machines and other communication equipment.

"The government should heed the repeated calls of the international community to restore civil and political rights," said Lars Normann Jorgensen, director of Amnesty International Denmark. "There must not be another round of mass arrests and restrictions on freedom of assembly ahead of next month's planned political protests."

"External pressure and assistance remains essential to ensure that both the government and the CPN (Maoist) meet their human rights obligations," he added.

"In the end, it is only with the cessation of hostilities that there can be adequate and effective protection of human rights for the Nepali people," said Purna Sen. "The decade-long conflict has exacted a very heavy toll, shattering the lives of families and severely limiting access to livelihoods, health, and education, among other human rights."

Background

The Amnesty International delegation included Purna Sen, Asia-Pacific Programme Director; Kate Allen, Director of Amnesty International UK; Lars Normann Jørgensen, Director of Amnesty International Denmark; and Kavita Menon, researcher on South Asia. The delegation met with representatives of the Royal Nepalese Army (RNA), the CPN (Maoist), victims of human rights abuses by both parties to the conflict, human rights defenders including lawyers and women's rights activists, members of the diplomatic community, and with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The mission's findings were based on interviews in Kathmandu and in Nepalgunj conducted during the three-day mission, as well on the body of work Amnesty International has done on Nepal over the past several years.

Further Information:

For more information, or to arrange an interview with one of the delegates, please contact Kavita Menon on +977 98 4142 8626 (Kathmandu) or Saria Rees-Roberts on +44 20 7413 5810.

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