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Bhutan: International observers should be given access to Indo-Bhutan border

Amnesty International is seriously concerned about reports that civilians have been caught up in a military offensive by the Royal Bhutanese Army (RBA) targeting camps belonging to the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO), separatist groups from northeast India with military bases in southern Bhutan.

The organization understands that parts of the border between Bhutan and India have been sealed, and a five kilometre zone on each side of the border established where entry is denied.

"The Bhutanese and Indian authorities must allow immediate access to the border area to international observers and relevant humanitarian agencies," Amnesty International urged.

Unconfirmed reports indicate that non combatants including at least 30 named women and their children, formerly living in the camps, have surrendered to the RBA and may be handed over to the Indian authorities.

Amnesty International is concerned that no information has been made publicly available about their whereabouts or the conditions in which they are being detained.

According to unconfirmed press reports, a senior ULFA spokesperson has indicated that it will initiate attacks on Bhutanese civilians living in northeast India if the Bhutanese authorities do not agree to call off the military offensive.

"Both sides to the conflict should strictly adhere to international humanitarian law, in particular Article 3, common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, which promotes respect for civilians in times of conflict," Amnesty International said.

"Parties to the conflict should ensure that civilians are able to have safe passage from the area where the conflict is taking place," the organization emphasized.

Background

The ULFA, NDFB and KLO are separatist groups operating in northeast India. The Bhutanese Government has held a series of talks with leaders of the groups, who set up camps in southern Bhutan in 1991, to persuade them to leave the country. In the latest developments in 2003, they ignored a 30 June

deadline set by the government of Bhutan to vacate their camps or face military action.

At the Government of Bhutan's National Assembly meeting, held between June and August 2003, it was agreed that King Jigme Singye Wangchuck would make a last attempt at dialogue to persuade the leaders of the separatist groups to dismantle their camps and leave the country but if that failed, Bhutan would take military action with the support of the Indian government.

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