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Bhutan: Crack-down on 'anti-nationals' in the east

Bhutanese authorities have in recent months arbitrarily arrested, tortured and ill-treated scores of pro-democracy activists in the east of the country, Amnesty International said today. Those arrested include dozens of Buddhist monks, religious teachers and young children.

“The perception around the world is that Bhutan is a ‘Shangrila’, but it is time that the international community wakes up to the reality of what is happening in the country,” Amnesty International said. “The international donors on which Bhutan depends should take the lead in encouraging the Bhutanese government to respect human rights.”

In a report issued today, the human rights organization revealed that more than 150 people have reportedly been arrested over the last six months on suspicion of being members or sympathizers of the Druk National Congress (DNC), a political organization set up in exile in Nepal in 1994.

Since its establishment, the DNC has gradually stepped up its activities demanding a democratic system of government and greater protection of, and respect for, human rights in Bhutan. In October 1997, it organized sit-ins, demonstrations, posterings and other non-violent grassroots campaigning. The government views these activities as fomenting civil and political unrest and promoting ‘anti-national’ activities.

“The government reacted to the October activities by arresting a large number of people -- the majority of whom are members of the *Sarchop* ethnic community in the east. Relatives, including women and young children, of genuine or simply suspected political activists have themselves become victims of human rights violations as the authorities step up their repression.” Amnesty International said.

The Bhutanese authorities have in the past taken some steps to address the human rights situation -- such as ratifying the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, inviting the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to visit the country periodically, and granting access to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) in 1994 and 1996.

But, according to Amnesty International much more needs to be done. In particular, the government should release any detainee not promptly charged with a criminal offence, and should ensure that all political detainees are given a fair trial. The authorities should also take steps to end torture and to safeguard the rights of those in detention, and allow the ICRC to expand its program of visits to other parts of the country, including the east.

Amnesty International’s report also cites the case of Rongthong Kunley Dorji, the founder of the DNC, who is currently in prison in New Delhi, India, awaiting the outcome of an extradition hearing. Rongthong Kunley Dorji was reportedly tortured in detention in Bhutan in 1991, and Amnesty International believes that if returned, he may again be tortured, and could face an unfair trial.

In a recent letter to King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the organization has asked to send a delegation to the country to investigate the human rights situation. A response is awaited.

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For a copy of the report: *Bhutan: Crack-down on anti-nationals in the east* (AI Index: ASA 14/01/98), or to arrange an interview, please contact:

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