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Nepal: A long ignored human rights crisis now on the brink of catastrophe

(Delhi) A human rights catastrophe is looming in Nepal following the declaration of the state of emergency by King Gyanendra on 1 February, declared Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

"The longstanding conflict between the Maoists and the armed forces has destroyed human rights in the countryside. Now, the state of emergency is destroying human rights in the urban areas, taking the country to the brink of disaster," said Ms Khan, presenting the findings of the Amnesty International mission to Nepal between 10-16 February.

"The state of emergency has strengthened the hand of the security forces, reduced the prospect of a political process towards peace and increased the likelihood of escalation of the conflict that could lead to even greater human suffering and abuse."

Political leaders, students, human rights activists, journalists and trade unionists arrested in the immediate aftermath of the declaration of the state of emergency remain in detention more than two weeks later. While some leaders have been released, more are being arrested, particularly at the district level. There is strict media censorship enforced by the army and a total clamp down on political dissent. A number of leading human rights activists, journalists and trade union leaders are in hiding or have fled the country.

"Wherever we went, we encountered a deep sense of fear, uncertainty and insecurity among the people," said Ms Khan.

"Nepal's dynamic civil society is being crippled by this state of emergency. Those who were exposing and condemning the excesses of the armed forces and the atrocities of the Maoists are now being muzzled. This will only serve to fuel impunity and reinforce the ongoing cycle of human rights abuses by both the security forces and the Maoists, with disastrous consequences for the ordinary people of Nepal."

Recent reports by Amnesty International demonstrate a dramatic increase in the scale of human rights abuses since the breakdown of the ceasefire in August 2003, including torture, detention, disappearances, displacement, abductions and unlawful killings. During visits to Nepalgunj, Biratnagar and Kathmandu jail, Amnesty International delegates met recent victims of human rights abuse by the security forces as well as the Maoists, including rape survivors, child soldiers and torture victims.

Ms Khan had a private audience with King Gyanendra where she conveyed to him the organization's serious concerns about the deteriorating human rights situation in the country as a result of

the on-going conflict, and made worse by the state of emergency. In response, the King assured her of his commitment to uphold human rights and Nepal's international obligations.

"The King will be judged, not by his promises, but by how those promises are put into action by his government," said Ms Khan.

"As major allies of Nepal and key providers of military aid, the US, UK and India play a critical role. They have been outspoken about the restoration of democracy. They need to give equal importance to ensuring the Nepalese government guarantees respect for human rights. For the vast majority of the people of Nepal, democracy is meaningless without human rights."

"Given the alliance between the palace and the military, the role of the security forces in restricting and violating human rights, and their increased significance during the state of emergency -- donors should suspend all military assistance to the Government as a means of pressurising it to change its human rights policies."

Referring to the forthcoming visit to the region of the British Foreign Secretary, Ms Khan noted that there is a real opportunity for the UK to show leadership in the EU by taking a strong stand on human rights and suspension of military aid.

"Time is running out -- Nepal is on a downward spiral. The international community has consistently failed the people of Nepal over the past decade. It must not do so again," she concluded.

Amnesty International is calling on:

The Government of Nepal to:

urgently restore fundamental human rights suspended during the state of emergency, and open a political process for resolving the conflict, based on justice and respect for human rights;
protect human rights defenders, journalists, trade unionists and other activists, including providing safe passage for those seeking temporary sanctuary in other countries, and guaranteeing the safety of those who remain in Nepal;
take effective steps to end impunity of the security forces, including independent investigations and trial of human rights crimes by civilian and not military courts.

The Maoists to:

commit themselves to respect international humanitarian law;
stop targeting civilians.

The Government of Nepal and the Maoist leadership to agree on a Human Rights Accord to ensure respect for human rights at all times during the conflict.

The international community to:

suspend military aid to the Government of Nepal as a means of pressure to change its human rights policies;
appoint at the forthcoming UN Commission on Human Rights a Special Rapporteur to scrutinize Nepal's human rights record.

The United Nations to:

verify that Nepalese troops who are to be deployed in peace keeping operations have not been implicated in human rights violations in Nepal;
establish a mission of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Nepal to protect human rights defenders, support the National Human Rights Commission and strengthen the judiciary.

For more information, or to arrange an interview with Ms Khan, please contact Judit Arenas on + 44 7778 472 188.

Please note that still images and a B-roll of Nepal are available.

Public Document

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