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## **Nepal: Human rights at a critical crossroads**

KATHMANDU -- The human rights situation in Nepal is now so serious that only a fundamental change of direction by the key players in the current conflict can prevent it from spinning out of control, Amnesty International said today.

Torture -- including rape -- abductions and political killings have been widespread since the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Maoist), which is ideologically close to the Communist Party of Peru (Shining Path), declared a "people's war" against the government in February 1996.

"Human rights have been the prime casualties of the ruthless 'people's war' and the government's heavy-handed response to it," Rory Mungoven, Director of Amnesty International's Asia Program, told a press conference in Kathmandu. "This conflict represents a critical crossroads for Nepal in terms of its development as a society that respects human rights."

"The brutal killing on 5 March of Yadu Gautam, candidate for the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist), by armed CPN (Maoist) members, sends a clear signal that the situation could be getting even worse in the run-up to the parliamentary elections in May."

The new report follows an Amnesty International delegation's visit to Nepal in November 1998 to investigate alleged human rights violations by police and abuses by armed members of the CPN (Maoist).

A dramatic increase in reports of arbitrary arrests, torture, extrajudicial executions and "disappearances" followed the government's launch of an "intensified security mobilization" operation in May 1998, which increased police action in several districts in Mid-Western, Western and Central Regions.

Torture of political detainees in police custody was widely reported. Both men and women arrested on suspicion of being CPN (Maoist) members or their relatives were tortured by methods including severe beatings with bamboo sticks and PVC pipes, beatings on the soles of the feet with a bamboo stick (*falanga*); rolling weighted bamboo sticks along the prisoner's thighs (*belana*) and simultaneous boxing on the ears (*telephono*).

Women detainees were also raped and sexually humiliated. One woman arrested in August 1998 in Bardiya District, Mid-Western Region, on suspicion of involvement in the murder of a local politician, was so severely tortured she could not walk at all for several days afterwards.

Her torturers put a stick across her lower back, stood on it and banged her head against the wall. She was threatened with electric shock treatment, rape and death unless she confessed to involvement in the murder. She claimed that one of the policemen who questioned her boasted: "I will be promoted if I kill you". She was eventually taken to court and charged after one month in police custody and released on bail two weeks later.

According to government figures, 1,659 suspected CPN (Maoist) supporters were arrested between May and November 1998. Approximately half were later released. Amnesty International believes that some of those still held may be prisoners of conscience, detained solely for their peaceful activities or associations.

Officials also say 227 "terrorists" were killed in "encounters" with police during the same period. However, Amnesty International believes that the 227 people killed include CPN (Maoist) members who were simply executed after being taken prisoner. Civilians suspected of supporting the armed movement have also been deliberately targeted and executed by the police.

To the organization's knowledge there have been no official inquiries into reports of torture or extrajudicial executions since the government's "intensified security mobilization" operation was launched.

Armed members of the CPN (Maoist) have reportedly also deliberately killed, abducted and tortured those considered to be enemies of the "people's war", including members and candidates of mainstream political parties, particularly the Nepali Congress Party (NC).

Twenty-four civilians were reportedly killed by armed CPN (Maoist) members and 52 civilians were injured in incidents between May and November 1998. Among those killed were Govinda Poudel, a NC member, who was hacked to death by a group of armed Maoists in Bardiyia District in August 1998.

In light of the forthcoming general elections in Nepal, Amnesty International is urging all political parties to place human rights protection and promotion high on their agendas, including a pledge to establish independent investigations into all human rights violations reported in the context of the "people's war".

The organization is also appealing to the CPN (Maoist) leadership to respect the lives of all civilians, and to prohibit their members from deliberately and arbitrarily killing and maiming civilians, including candidates, campaigners, electoral staff and voters in the forthcoming elections.

"The coming months could provide a crucial turning point for human rights in Nepal if steps are not taken now to significantly reduce the level of violations," Mr Mungoven said. "It is up to political leaders on all sides to take responsibility for improving the situation."

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