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Nepal: Mass arrests spark fear of violence

Crackdown on civil society ahead of elections -- joint statement by Amnesty International, International Commission of Jurists and Human Rights Watch

The Nepali government arrested more than 100 political leaders and civil society activists today, raising fears that violence and human rights abuses could spiral out of control. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Commission of Jurists are alarmed by these developments, and by orders reportedly given by the district administrations granting security forces permission to shoot anybody violating curfew at night.

The international organizations called on the government immediately to free all the detainees, and to exercise restraint and abide by its international human rights obligations as the country approaches the 8 February deadline set by the government for holding controversial local elections. Nearly all of Nepal's political parties have opposed holding the elections on the grounds that local conditions do not permit free and fair elections.

"These arrests, combined with the heightened restrictions on civil and political rights over the past week, highlight the government's continuing disregard for human rights," said Purna Sen, director of Amnesty International's Asia Pacific program.

Today's arrests of at least 100 leading members of political parties, human rights groups and civil society, combined with other repressive measures instituted by the government of Nepal in the past week, come ahead of anti-government demonstrations planned for the next few days. The government has imposed curfews, restricted communications and placed an absolute ban on demonstrations within Kathmandu.

"The curfew, the ban on demonstrations, today's mass arrests and severe communication restrictions are all attempts by the government to silence peaceful and legitimate political protest, which is needed now more than ever in Nepal," said Nicholas Howen, secretary-general of the International Commission of Jurists. "If peaceful political debate is prohibited, there will never be an end to Nepal's 10-year civil war."

Since 1 February 2005, when King Gyanendra assumed all executive authority with the army's support, fundamental rights – including freedom of assembly and expression, the right to information and the right to be free from arbitrary detention – have been suspended.

"Today's arrests are an attempt to suppress any vocal opposition to the king, or his attempts to win legitimacy by holding elections," said Brad Adams, Asia director of Human Rights Watch. "Silencing the

leadership, the king hopes, will silence the people. Such actions belie his stated belief in democratic principles and the rule of law.”

The European Union, India and Japan have all expressed serious concern over the restrictions on political activities in Nepal, particularly the arrests of political leaders and human rights activists. The three organizations called on other members of the international community to press the Nepali government to abide by its international human rights obligations.

“The government, particularly the Home Ministry, must take responsibility for the protection of all Nepali citizens. The government of Nepal should be aware that the international community is gravely concerned with developments this week and should take immediate steps to remedy the serious human rights violations that have taken place today,” said Purna Sen of Amnesty International.

The organizations also urged the political parties to honor their promise to hold peaceful demonstrations.

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