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Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Karachi.....Nepal must not go the same way

The Himalayan state of Nepal is courting a human rights disaster, as the face-off between the government and an armed Maoist movement hardens into patterns recalling other regional conflicts.

In a new report, Amnesty International lists a chilling catalogue of violations, by both the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Maoist) and security forces since the CPN launched its "people's war" four years ago.

The report says that:

The CPN has deliberately killed at least 200 people since the start of its "people's war". Many of them were civilians branded "enemies of the people" for their links with the ruling Nepali Congress Party (NCP).

Of these 200, at least 80 were killed in just the last 14 months. The lives of two 15-year-old boys were not spared. The Maoist group has also handed out summary justice, including cruel forms of punishment, through kangaroo courts.

Police, for their part, executed hundreds of people in disputed circumstances, including those they could instead have arrested and others who had already surrendered. Courts lack the teeth to prosecute such crimes.

At least 400 out of nearly 800 killed by police in these four years may have been deliberately executed. Forty-four others have "disappeared", including students and lawyers. Helpless relatives run from courtroom to police-station trying to discover their fate.

Reports of political and other prisoners being tortured are common, Amnesty International has found over several field trips. A 21-one-year old man died last summer after six days of torture. A government letter admitted he was a victim of "heavy handed treatment". Police officials have been arrested and charged with murder in this case, but other complaints are ignored.

"It is tragic that such crimes should be taking place at a time when Nepal is celebrating its first decade of multi-party democracy after the end of *panchayat* rule," Amnesty International said.

"The Nepal government looks set to follow the mistakes of its neighbours by pushing through laws giving the police and administration sweeping powers," the human rights organisation said.

"Amnesty International recognises the security threat posed by the 'people's war' and is aware of the other challenges facing this six-month old government, in one of the world's poorest countries."

"But draconian laws lacking human rights safeguards are neither a just nor an effective way of meeting them. As experience elsewhere has shown, they further brutalise opponents and lead to a spiral of violence; they are also liable to be misused against civilians and to erode the rule of law."

"Ministers and ruling party leaders who spent years in prison for their opposition to *panchayat* rule should know this only too well."

Amnesty International appeals to the government to back up recent political initiatives for dealing with the conflict with a clear signal that human rights violations will not be tolerated, whether they are committed by the CPN -- or the police.

It also urges the government to set up new mechanisms to ensure that all allegations will be independently investigated and to speed up its long-delayed moves to set up a human rights commission.

Amnesty International Secretary General Pierre Sané will deliver these appeals in person later this month, in talks with government ministers in Kathmandu. Over four days, the delegation led by Mr Sané will also meet NGOS, students, academics, refugees and other groups to discuss a range of human rights challenges facing Nepal.

The human rights organization also urges the international community to pay attention to this problem. It welcomes, in this context, the current visit to Nepal by the UN's Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Asma Jehangir.

"It is vital that the Nepal government takes these warnings seriously and acts to ensure that Nepal does not turn into another South Asian war zone -- and human rights disaster zone," Amnesty International said.

Background:

Until 1990, Nepal was under the *panchayat* (non-party) system. *Panchayat* rule ended that year, after more than three decades of political struggle. After the introduction of multi-party democracy, a constitution was put into place providing increased protection for human rights.

However, the optimism of human rights organizations at the start of this new era has gradually been replaced by disappointment as police went unpunished for human rights violations committed during the *panchayat* era, and new allegations began to surface.

The human rights situation has deteriorated more sharply, as the Amnesty International report points out, after the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Maoist) launched its armed "people's war" on February 13, 1996, to overthrow the government and set up a republic in Nepal.

To arrange interviews, or to get a copy of our report, *Nepal: Human Rights and Security*, please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on 44 171 413 5729 / 44 171 413 5566 or 44 378 472119. Interviews can also be arranged with Pierre Sané, during and after his visit to Nepal (February 20-24) by calling the same numbers.