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Nepal: Vigilante groups worsen human rights situation

The emergence of government-backed vigilante groups in Nepal - known as "Village Defence Forces" - is increasing the terror and violence experienced by the civilian population in the country, according to evidence collected by Amnesty International.

In its latest report, "*Nepal: fractured country, shattered lives*", based on a recent visit to Nepal, the organization stresses that the human rights situation in the countryside continues to deteriorate. The country remains gripped by a brutal 9-year-long armed conflict between Maoist rebels and the security forces.

"The creation of these "Village Defence Forces" blurs the distinction between combatants and non-combatants resulting in an increased number of civilian casualties," said Purna Sen, Asia-Pacific Programme Director.

On 2 August, in response to an Amnesty International report "*Nepal: Children caught in the conflict*" issued on 26 July, the RNA stated that civilians should not take the law into their own hands. Purna Sen said "While such statements from RNA headquarters are welcome, they directly contradict the reality in the districts, where we found strong evidence of security force support for vigilante groups".

"Village Defence Forces" first emerged in February 2005 in Kapilvastu district, where, in the space of one week, mob violence orchestrated by these groups resulted in 31 deaths and the burning of 708 homes. Since then "Village Defence Forces" have expanded their activities elsewhere, with the support of the government and security forces. Villagers told Amnesty International delegates that they were being terrorised by the groups, who were forcibly recruiting them, beating them, searching their houses and sexually harassing local women.

Amnesty International's latest report also highlights numerous cases of human rights abuses by both the security forces and Maoists. Amnesty International's delegates were able to visit Maoist suspects held in military barracks who had been tortured in an effort to extract confessions.

"Torture by the military is both systematic and routine. Military officials who operate in an environment of complete impunity admitted to using ill-treatment to extract confessions." said Purna Sen.

Amnesty International is concerned at the continued culture of denial and impunity within Nepal's security forces. In a statement yesterday the RNA rejected Amnesty International's claims that security

forces have detained and tortured children as “generic”, despite detailed information about individual cases provided by Amnesty International. Likewise, the RNA claimed to have no knowledge of an incident of alleged extrajudicial execution of three children, although information about this incident had been sent to the Chief of Army Staff by Amnesty International in January 2005.

Numerous and vicious atrocities committed by Maoist rebels were also recorded during the visit, including the abduction and killing of civilians and unarmed security forces personnel.

"Despite claims from Maoist leaders that they will respect the Geneva Conventions there is precious little evidence of this respect on the ground. Abuses by all sides to the conflict are leaving a legacy of thousands of shattered lives and a country riven by violence," concluded Puma Sen.

For the full text of the report, please go to:
<http://web.amnesty.library/index/engasa310632005>

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