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Nepal: Government fails to protect women human rights activists from violent attacks

One year on from their election to power, the Maoist Government of Nepal has failed to deliver on its promises to protect women, Amnesty International said today. Evidence of this failure can be found in the treatment of women activists campaigning for human rights who are the victims of beatings, sexual attacks and murder, with no significant effort made to bring the perpetrators to justice.

“When the Maoist Government came to power it made commitments to protect women’s rights but these now seem like false promises,” said Madhu Malhotra, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific Deputy Director. “Now that they are in government, all the revolutionary rhetoric has not resulted in real improvements in women’s lives.”

“Women activists play a crucial role in Nepal, where many women are unaware of their rights and are afraid of confronting social and government authority,” said Madhu Malhotra. “Women activists are singled out for violent attacks as it further promotes a culture of silence and discourages women experiencing violence to speak out.”

Amnesty International has found that, in spite of the election promises made by the government, women human rights activists continue to be at high risk of attack because they dare to challenge Nepal’s patriarchal divisions. Many have become social outcasts for raising the issues of domestic and sexual violence and are targets of intimidation, beatings and even death. The Nepalese police often refuse to file a complaint or to fully investigate attacks and offer no protection.

Two women’s rights activists in Nepal have been murdered since the new government came to power, with no significant attempts made to investigate or prosecute the crimes. The most recent case was that of Uma Singh, a journalist for Radio Today FM who was a member of the Women's Human Rights Defender Network. She was attacked on 11 January 2009 by a group of men armed with sharp weapons. She was severely mutilated and died on her way to hospital in Kathmandu.

In June 2008 Laxmi Bohara, from Kanchanpur, was severely beaten and then reportedly murdered by her husband and mother-in-law who were not happy with her working to defend human rights.

Amnesty International is calling on the Nepali Government to take urgent action to:

- ensure the safety and protection of women human rights activists, particularly in rural areas
- develop a national plan of action, including the establishment of safe shelters/homes and other facilities for women survivors of violence
- take all possible measure to ensure justice, truth and reparations for crimes of violence against women

committed during and after the conflict

Background

Following an extended protest by women human rights campaigners in July, initiated after the alleged murder of a female activist and subsequent failure of police to properly investigate the crime, the government established a task force to make recommendations regarding violence against women. The task force has yet to submit its report, which was promised within two months.

In rural settings, women human rights activists often work in remote locations with minimal communication facilities and support mechanisms. These women challenge discriminatory cultural practices, such as early child marriage and boxsi (witchcraft) but can face restrictions and have been attacked by members of the community for their work, as has been documented in Eastern Terai, southern Nepal.

The state's duty to protect women from violence is explicitly stated in the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, which Nepal has ratified. States should pursue by "all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating violence against women" (Article 4). Under international human rights law, the state has an obligation not only to ensure that its agents and officials do not commit violence against women, but also to protect women from violence committed by private individuals and bodies including members of their own families and communities.

An Amnesty International mission visited Nepal in November 2008 and spoke to a wide range of women activists. Hindus, Muslims, Janajatis and other marginalized groups as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender activists, all shared stories of the challenges they face. A Dalit woman human rights activist for example, faces multiple abuses as a result of caste based violence, in addition to gender and class abuses.

Notes to editors

Amnesty International activists will be holding a demonstration to highlight the plight of women human rights activists, in Narayanghat, Nepal on 10 April.

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