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NEPAL: ELEVEN PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE DETAINED IN NEPAL FOR OVER TEN MONTHS

The Government of Nepal should release immediately and unconditionally 11 Christians arrested in September 1994 on suspicion of proselytizing, Amnesty International said today.

"We believe that these people are prisoners of conscience and their arrest and detention is in contravention of their right to freedom of religion," the human rights organization said.

The 11 detainees -- a Nepali national, an Indian national and nine Nepali-speaking Bhutanese refugees -- were arrested at Danabari, Ilam District, and charged with proselytizing, an offence under Nepali law.

At a hearing on 1 May, more than seven months after the trial began, the judge is reported to have stated that the case should be dismissed. However, the final hearing of the trial has since been postponed on three occasions: 20 May, 2 July and 26 July. The next date of the hearing will be in one week's time.

Lawyers say that this continual postponement of the final hearing is contrary to usual legal practice in Nepal. Furthermore, their arrest and detention contravenes Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Nepal is a party.

The 11 defendants tried unsuccessfully to obtain their release, either unconditionally or on bail, by filing a writ of *habeas corpus* and lodging an appeal in both the District and Appellate Courts. They remain in detention at Ilam District Jail awaiting their final hearing..

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