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NEPAL: SHARP INCREASE IN HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS SINCE THE OUTBREAK OF THE "PEOPLE'S WAR"

The upsurge of human rights violations since the outbreak of the "people's war" last year represents a worrying deterioration in Nepal's human rights situation, Amnesty International said in a report released today.

Both security forces and armed opposition groups have committed a growing number of human rights abuses, including deliberate killings of civilians and torture, as well as arbitrary arrests and detentions since the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Maoist) declared a "people's war" against the existing government on 13 February 1996.

"Nepal's human rights record had improved tremendously since the establishment of multi-party democracy in 1990. We are therefore extremely concerned that the use of torture and the number of unlawful killings has increased significantly during the last year," the human rights organization said.

At least 50 people have been killed in what Nepal's police call "encounters" or armed confrontations with CPN (Maoist) activists. Amnesty International believes however that the police have repeatedly resorted to killing people in situations where such force was clearly unjustified, and as an alternative to lawful arrest. Police have also been responsible for torture including rape, arbitrary arrests and detention.

Among the most commonly reported forms of torture are *falanga* -- beatings on the soles of the feet -- and *belana*, where a detainee is held prone by police standing on either side and applying pressure to the legs by rolling a weighted bamboo cane down the thighs. This causes muscle damage and sometimes leads to renal failure.

The CPN (Maoist), which is ideologically close to the Communist Party of Peru (Shining Path), has reportedly been responsible for at least 13 deliberate killings of civilians, including members of mainstream political parties, defectors from its political wing, the United People's Front (SJM) and suspected informants.

"Whatever violent activities the CPN (Maoist) resort to can never justify the police torturing and killing children, women and landless farmers," Amnesty International said. "If there is evidence of people being responsible for criminal activities, then they should be arrested, charged and brought to trial. Under no circumstances should they be tortured or killed."

Eye-witness reports suggest that contrary to police reports, the killing of at least two of six people on 27 February 1996 -- one of the largest incidents of alleged "encounter" killings -- was deliberate. Fourteen-year-old Khadka Bahadur Khatri Chhetri apparently tried to run away with his hands handcuffed and was shot in the chest by a group of police officers.

Witnesses are reported to have heard another victim, Pashupati Khatri Chhetri, ask for water while lying on the ground. A police officer then allegedly shot him in the throat. At no time did police claim that officers had been injured in the "encounter". The police reportedly refused to return the bodies to the relatives, indicating an attempt to cover up possible unlawful killings.

By the end of November 1996, some 1,358 people had been arrested on suspicion of being members of the CPN (Maoist) or SJM, since the "people's war" started. Although many had been released, approximately 600 people remained in prison awaiting trial, many of them members of the Magar tribal community and lower Hindu castes. Amnesty International believes there are several prisoners of conscience among those arrested

Baburam Bhattarai, the leader of the SJM, indirectly admitted that people had been deliberately and arbitrarily killed in a statement issued on 9 March 1996, when he reportedly stated: "Targets for the war are selected only because of their role as exploiters and not because of their affiliation with any particular political party."

"The CPN (Maoist) has shown an appalling disrespect for human rights during the last year. We implore its members and activists to immediately stop torturing and killing people who have no part in the conflict," Amnesty International said.

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