

AdvocacyNet

Advocacy Net - News Bulletin - Number 34, April 25, 2005

DEATH SQUAD WARNING AS REPRESSION IN NEPAL DEEPENS - Nepalese Civil Society seeks a suspension of aid until democracy is restored Washington, DC, April 25, 2005: Nearly three months after the King of Nepal seized power in a coup, the country is in the grip of deepening abuse and militarization, according to Dinesh Prasain, a leading member of Nepal's civil society. Mr. Prasain, who is on a speaking tour of the United States, is expressing particular concern at the emergence of village defense committees, which he warned could evolve into "death squads."

Mr. Prasain is Coordinator of the Collective Campaign for Peace (COCAP), a network of some 30 grassroots organizations and a partner of the Advocacy Project (AP). His tour is being sponsored by Amnesty International, AP and the International Nepal Solidarity Network (INSN).

Mr. Prasain's visit comes only days before the US Congress are due to review a request by the Bush Administration to supply Nepal with \$4.65 million of military aid and training. The request comes in spite of the fact that the Administration has reacted angrily to the King's coup and made democracy a cornerstone of US foreign policy. Nepal's biggest international supporters include North Korea and Cuba, which should further alienate the US, say civil society leaders.

Nepal's other major aid donors appear determined to apply real pressure. Britain and India have suspended military aid, and the British government recently halted two projects, for training police and prison management. The Danish government has also suspended \$26 million of development assistance for Nepal while the World Bank will shortly decide whether to proceed with a \$70 million loan, which was put on hold immediately after the coup.

In a further sign of international impatience with King Gyanendra, the human rights crisis in Nepal was also criticized in a tough resolution that passed unanimously in the UN Human Rights Commission on Wednesday. Louise Arbour, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, has signed an agreement with Nepal to deploy a team of human rights monitors to the country. The team is expected to leave within a matter of weeks, and there are hopes that it could eventually include as many as 25 monitors.

Nepal's descent from a tourist paradise into lawlessness began in 1996, when Maoist rebels rose up against the monarchy. At least 11,000 Nepalis are thought to have died since, and half a million have been displaced. Last year, the UN working group on disappearances asked Nepal to explain 31 new disappearances - more than any other government in the world. The International Committee of the Red Cross reported 931 Nepalis as missing at the end of 2004.

On February 1 of this year, the King announced in a radio address that he was taking control of the government. All communications with the outside world were cut and the Army closed down all media outlets during the King's actual speech.

Mr. Prasain said that King Gyanendra has made some superficial concessions since February 1, but that the militarization of Nepalese society and the suppression of rights have intensified. As proof of this, the rate of new disappearances - which have badly tarnished Nepal's reputation - has slowed. But, said Mr. Prasain, summary executions have increased.

The most troubling development is the emergence of village defense committees. These existed before the coup, but they have been activated and armed in six of the country's 75 districts by the government ostensibly in an effort to combat the Maoists. In fact, said Mr. Prasain, the committees include known criminals and their activities are adding to the level of violence in rural areas.

A defense committee recently went on a rampage on February 17 in the district of Kapilvastu after Maoists tried to abduct two people. 600 houses were burned in 21 villages, and at least 31 people killed. The Maoists returned and killed 11 villagers in revenge. In another incident, in the district of Nawalparasi, a village committee seized one Dalit (untouchable) man, cut off his left arm and made him eat it, before they shot him. Instead of denouncing this violence, the government sent three ministers to Kapilvastu after the incident to praise the committees. The King also defended the committees in a recent interview.

Mr. Prasain said that the number of human rights defenders currently in detention has fallen from a high of 22 to 12. But, he said, about 800 Nepalis from all walks of life are still detained and are prevented from meeting with lawyers and family on a regular basis. Five groups, including COCAP, attempted to visit jails last week, but were turned away.

The Nepalese Army continues to target civil society even as it releases some high-profile figures. Girija Koirala, the president of the Parliament, was released from detention, whereupon the Army arrested several student leaders who visited him. The Army has threatened to force all NGOs to go through a registration process, and journalists receive death threats, which cannot be formally linked to any official source. Gays, and gay rights groups, have been threatened. Parliamentary committees are suspended.

Meanwhile, the King has consolidated his control on the government by handpicking 5 regional commissioners and 14 zonal commissioners. Although reports are now circulating in Kathmandu that he might lift the state of emergency in an effort to ease international pressure, new laws are expected to be passed to permanently suppress the press and other freedoms.

In such a context, there is a grave risk that even human rights monitoring will be exploited. The International Committee of the Red Cross has expanded its delegation to 39 international delegates and is visiting detainees, which provides a veneer of respectability to the regime. But Mr. Prasain gave one example of a journalist who was detained for ten months, blindfolded the entire time, and hidden when an ICRC delegation visited - an egregious violation of ICRC rules. Civil society will also press to ensure that the UN human rights monitoring mission is able to visit to all detention centers without qualification.

In spite of this bleak assessment, Nepalis refuse to be intimidated. The newspapers are continuing to report demonstrations, even though one prominent editor has been called in by the police on five occasions and warned to stop publishing material that "goes against the spirit of the royal proclamation." Cameramen are risking death to capture protests on video, and the exile community in Delhi is increasingly effective at getting out information.

King Gyanendra is exploiting fears that any criticism of him will open the door to a take-over by the Maoists. But this is strongly disputed by civil society leaders like Mr. Prasain, who said that a democratic government would stand a far greater chance of ending the war and protecting rights. The five main parties have consistently received more than 90% of the popular vote in five local or parliamentary elections since 1990. The political parties are also pledged to address the concerns of marginalized groups like the Dalit, many of whom are attracted by the Maoist message.

While it accepts that humanitarian aid will continue to be needed, Nepali civil society remains strongly opposed to development aid until democracy is restored. It is particularly keen that the World Bank suspend the large \$70 million loan, which was frozen immediately after the coup. This decision was ascribed to pressure from Nepal's major donors, which also carry weight on the World Bank's board of governors, although Bank staff insist that it was not linked directly to the suppression of democracy. The Bank rejects any suggestion that its loans should be conditioned to human rights.

The Bank is sending an assessment mission to Nepal within the next two weeks. If the mission recommends that the loan go through, and the Bank's governors agree, it would certainly open the door to more international aid and rubberstamp the King's coup. Some activists would like the loan halted on human rights grounds, but Mr. Prasain said it is not even necessary to force the Bank on this principle. The Bank itself has stated that good governance is a precondition for development. In addition, he said, the crisis in Nepal is so deep and widespread that the Bank's own safeguards - such as involving local stakeholders - cannot possibly be guaranteed. Mr. Prasain added that the Maoists control much of the countryside, making it impossible to ensure that the development aid is effectively implemented. "(Aid) can do little more than pay for salaries and rent," he said. "It cannot address poverty in such circumstances." Apart from lobbying lawmakers and human rights organizations in the US, Mr. Prasain is also calling on the Voice of American to reinstate its Nepali language news service, which has been discontinued. He is also meeting with members of the Nepali diaspora community, who sponsored a portion of his tour, to discuss strategies for supporting the movement for democracy and human rights in Nepal.