

CANDLELIGHT PROTEST IN NEPAL KICKS OFF NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO PROTEST 3,000 DISAPPEARANCES

AdvocacyNet

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Kathmandu, August 26, 2003: Human rights advocates in Nepal are launching a nationwide campaign to protest the disappearance of thousands of Nepalese, and halt the routine mistreatment and torture of those detained in Nepal's jails.

The campaign was announced at a press conference on August 15, and will kick off Wednesday (August 27) with candlelight rallies in all 40 districts of the country. It is being organized by the Advocacy Forum, a Nepali human rights group and member of the Collective Campaign for Peace (COCAP), a community-based network that is working to rebuild Nepali society in the aftermath of the Maoist insurgency.

The Advocacy Project (AP) sent an intern, Katherine Kuo, to work with COCAP this summer. Among her other duties, Ms. Kuo helped the Advocacy Forum produce brochures and carried out trainings for COCAP members in the Terai region of Nepal.

The Forum has registered over 3,000 disappearances in Nepal since 2001, and Forum lawyers say that the problem intensified after the Maoist insurgency began in 1996. Both the Maoists and the government detained, killed, and tortured, but the abuses increased sharply after the government declared a State of Emergency in late 2001. This authorized the police and army to arrest and detain suspected Maoists without going through the normal legal process. Nepal accounted for 28 of the 120 urgent inquiries that were delivered to governments in 2002 by the UN's Working Group on Disappearances.

Forum lawyers have investigated 100 disappearances in detail, but this is exceptionally difficult because many of the kidnappings occur in isolated rural areas which are often under Maoist control. In addition, before obtaining a search warrant, the Forum must first identify the location and abductors of the disappeared person - something that is often impossible. The Forum has requested advice from the UN.

The Forum is particularly concerned about the "structural weakness" of Nepal's legal system, which it says opens the way to illegal detention by the security forces, as well as wide torture:

"Reports of corruption, falsified documents, illegal arrests, and prolonged detentions are common. The poor are particularly susceptible. Detainees wait in crowded, unsanitary custody centers far removed from public scrutiny; go days and even weeks without bathing; and sometimes live off others' leftover food. Torture is practiced regularly to force confessions. Victims are kicked, beaten with all types of instruments, and sometimes electrically shocked. Over 60% of detainees are tortured, yet few speak up out

of fear of retaliation from authorities. Women are tortured, sexually abused, disowned by their families, and lacking in financial means to afford legal aid.”

The Forum has set five principal goals for its outreach campaign: 1) To stop disappearances; 2) To define disappearances as a crime against humanity and establish a high-level commission to investigate individual cases; 3) To publish a national report, file cases against perpetrators according to national and international laws, and try perpetrators; 4) to clarify the status of disappeared people to their families; and 5) to compensate victims and their families.

Forum activists plan to distribute 10,000 copies of a 2-page flier throughout the country, and follow up with public meetings and rallies in front of the administrative headquarters of the 40 districts.

* To read Katherine Kuo's weblogs (blogs) on her work in Nepal visit the AP website: <http://www.advocacynet.org/author/kate-kuo/>.

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