

PROMINENT NEPALI PEACE ACTIVIST CONDUCTS SPEAKING TOUR IN US

AdvocacyNet

News Bulletin 33, April 18, 2005

Dinesh Prasain, a leading human rights activist has embarked upon a three-week tour of the US to educate policy makers, human rights organizations, and the public on the critical political and human rights and situation in that country and to lobby the American government to take a more active role in mediating the conflict.

Dinesh Prasain, the coordinator of the Collective Campaign for Peace (COCAP), a partner of the Advocacy Project, has long been outspoken against abuses by the government. His visit on April 18 comes over two months after King Gyanendra dismantled the government and imposed a state of emergency under his rule.

Since then, the Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) has launched a campaign of intimidation in which dozens of Nepali citizens have been arrested. Furthermore, the authorities have placed democratic leaders, civil society heads, and student representatives under detention and instituted severe restrictions on the press. Although telephone and internet communication were initially shut down and have since been restored (with the exception of mobile access), prohibitions on the press continue to be in effect.

A troubling development since the beginning of the crisis has been the government's reliance on civilian armed mobs to attack citizens believed to be Maoists or Maoist sympathizers. Nepalese officials have argued that such groups, known as village defense committees, are better able to protect communities from rebel violence. However, the reliance upon these forces with no oversight and little incentive to respect human rights has only escalated the conflict. According to a recent report by the International Crisis Group, since February 1 these mobs have beaten and burned to death at least 31 innocent villagers, with the approval of local security forces.

Nepal has been in a state of crisis for almost a decade. In 1996, Maoist rebels declared war on the government with the aim of doing away with the constitutional monarchy and establishing a people's republic. Numerous human rights abuses have been committed with impunity by both sides of the conflict, including thousands extra-judicial executions, torture, arbitrary detention of civilians, and enforced disappearances. In fact, Nepal has been ranked near the top of a list compiled by the UN of countries with disappearances of citizens.

During his tour, Mr. Prasain will be traveling to Washington, DC, to meet with several members of Congress, officials from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and National Security Council, as well as human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. He will then travel to New York, Ithaca, Boston

and Atlanta to meet with representatives from the UN and other NGO's. He will also meet with members of Nepal's diaspora community in all five cities.

Mr. Prasain will make the case to US policy makers that the Administration should suspend all military, developmental and humanitarian aid to Nepal until the government restores press freedoms, releases all political prisoners and lifts the state of emergency. Up to now, the Bush Administration has been reluctant to halt foreign assistance, fearing that it could embolden the Maoist insurgency even further and make the country a haven for terrorism.

However, Mr. Prasain believes that this must occur to send a signal to the King: "Military aid should be stopped until the army is under the clear control of a democratically elected civilian government. Providing aid to any authoritarian and unaccountable government will only strengthen dictatorial tendencies and lead to a human rights catastrophe", he said.

He also hopes to get the international community to listen more to the mainstream political parties and expand the network of support for civil society and for the human rights movement and democratization process.

In a promising development, the Government of Nepal recently signed an agreement with the UN to establish a UN human rights monitoring office in Nepal. Under the terms of the agreement, the Office will seek the cooperation of both government security forces and Maoists to ensure that all human rights violations, wherever they occur, are investigated and reported.

AP has supported COCAP since 2003. During the summer of that year, we sent an intern to Kathmandu to work with them and launched an online campaign in support of Mr. Prasain in January 2004 after he was beaten late at night by unidentified security officials.

The petition raised 758 signatures, which were handed into the Nepalese embassy in Washington. The publicity brought about a temporary change in the government's policy of conducting unauthorized night-time raids.

* For a background to the crisis, visit the website of the International Dalit Solidarity Network <http://idsn.org/country-information/nepal/>

* To read the March 24, 2005, report by the International Crisis Group, titled "Nepal: Dealing With a Human Rights Crisis", click here: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/425281b94.html>