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NEPALESE DALIT BREAK WITH THE GOVERNMENT AND DEMAND 20 PERCENT SHARE OF NEW ASSEMBLY SEATS, JUNE 26, 2007

June 26, 2007, Kathmandu, Nepal: A major conference of Nepalese Dalit has rejected a government offer to give Dalit 6 percent of the seats in the new Constituent Assembly that will pave the way for a new Constitution and could address the roots of cast discrimination.

After meeting for two days on June 16-17 at the first-ever National Citizen's Assembly of Dalit in Kathmandu, more than 2,000 Dalit activists and supporters voted to demand one fifth of the Assembly seats for Dalit, and to mount a concerted campaign to pressure the government to agree.

The decision puts the Dalit firmly on a collision course with Nepal's main political parties, even though both were close allies during last year's peaceful revolution.

It could also pit the Dalit against other minorities, which would have to surrender more of their share of seats on the Assembly to accommodate Dalit demands.

In spite of this, the recent Dalit conference concluded that the restoration of democracy has not improved the status of Dalit and that the time has come to exert some political pressure.

The communique states: "Though Dalits participated actively in the uprising, they remain curtailed from accessing social, economic, political, administrative and other sectors."

The conference was organized by several leading Dalit advocacy groups, including the Jagaran Media Center (JMC), and attended by Prachanda, head of the country's Maoists.

Two Peace Fellows from The Advocacy Project (AP), who are volunteering with JMC this summer, helped put out information from the conference.

Prakash Nepal, from the Nepali-American Society for Oppressed Community (NASO), a Dalit diaspora group in the United States that has lobbied for 20 percent of Nepal's development aid to be earmarked for Dalit, welcomed the conference outcome.

"I personally support this, and I think this is what was needed," he said. Dalit frustration came to a head on June 14, when the Nepalese parliament decided on an allocation of seats for the new Constituent Assembly that will be elected in November.

Nepal's minorities hope to use the new constitution to end discrimination. As a result, the composition of the Assembly has been the subject of intensive political horse-trading.

The government is proposing that 240 of the 497 Assembly seats go to those with the highest votes ("first past the post"), while 240 will be shared among Nepal's minorities, including the Dalit, and the country's isolated areas. The cabinet will appoint the remaining 17 seats.

Half of the 497 seats have been allocated to women but only 6 percent will go to Dalits, who account for about a fifth of the population.

This was sharply rejected by the Dalit conference, which called for a new constitutional amendment to ensure that Dalit receive 20 percent of the seats. The conference also called for the monarchy to be abolished.

The conference organizers have formed a new coordinating group, the Dalit Citizen Movement Central Coordination Committee, to promote the conference agenda and forge unity.

Dalit advocacy has been severely hampered in the past by competition between factions. Pointing out that Dalit suffer from landlessness, illiteracy, and technical skills, the conference communique calls for Dalit to be afforded "economic protection." It recommended that exploitative labor systems be abolished, that Dalit women be represented in government, and that Dalit school children be given free primary education.

AP Peace Fellows Devin Greenleaf and Ted Samuel are volunteering this summer with JMC. Four other Peace Fellows are working with the Collective Campaign for Peace (COCAP) in Nepal: Jeff Yarborough, Nicole Farkouh, Mark Koenig and Tassos Coulaloglou

- For profiles of untouchability in Nepal, and the work of JMC, visit http://advocacy.net.org/bhola_s_scoop/
- [Read Devin Greenleaf's blog](#)
- [Read Ted Samuel's blog](#)