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TORTURE REMAINS WIDESPREAD IN DEMOCRATIC NEPAL, WARN ADVOCATES, JULY 13, 2007

July 13, 2007, Kathmandu, Nepal: More than 1,300 new cases of torture have been recorded in Nepal by the Advocacy Forum, a leading Nepali human rights organization, since the restoration of democracy in April 2006.

The news was given at a recent conference in the town of Baglung, Nepal. The conference called on the government of Nepal to ratify the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention Against Torture - a move that would allow Nepalis to lodge complaints at the international level against their government and also allow independent monitors to investigate torture in Nepal.

Meanwhile, the Collective Campaign for Peace (COCAP), a network of organizations that includes the Advocacy Forum, completed a week of lobbying earlier this month aimed at forcing the government to ratify the International Criminal Court (ICC). Torture is defined as a crime against humanity in the Court's statute.

The Baglung meeting was convened to highlight the lack of progress in prosecuting those who committed crimes before the peaceful revolution in April 2006. But observers were also shocked to hear that torture has persisted under democracy.

According to Ram Sharma, Director of the Advocacy Forum in Baglung, the police are responsible for most recorded cases. About 35 percent of those arrested in Baglung district are tortured, he said.

Mr Sharma told Tassos Coulaloglou, an AP Peace Fellow who is volunteering for COCAP in Baglung this summer, that the police often do not understand the gravity or even meaning of torture - and that one police chief even described a "witch's curse" as torture.

"The police lack the training to conduct proper, scientifically based investigations and rely almost exclusively on physical intimidation to extract confessions," said Mr Sharma. On the rare occasions that anti-torture laws are enforced, compensation is paid by the government not the torturer. Victims receive a maximum of 100,000 rupees (\$1,500).

Shortly after the Baglung meeting, Mr Coulaloglou traveled to Kathmandu to attend the week of activities in support of the International Criminal Court. The Court has now been accepted by 104 governments and a COCAP statement argued that by joining the ICC, the Nepal government would make a strong statement that it is serious about protecting human rights and strengthening the judicial system.

Mr Coulaloglou described the atmosphere in a blog as the lobbying began. "Some of the

highlights will include street plays, sticker and T-shirt distribution, and campus awareness programs to increase visibility for the campaign. Petitions will also be given to the political leaders of the ruling 8-party coalition and there will be a radio program on Friday to spread the word. A demonstration will end the week and if the volunteers' enthusiasm is any indication, they'll have made their voices heard. Right now I can FEEL them practicing their different chants in the meeting room downstairs. Wow, it is loud!"

On the political front, several Nepali minorities and interest groups have begun lobbying for a larger role in the Constituent Assembly, whose members will be elected in November to draft a new constitution. Twenty-two Dalit leaders were arrested on Wednesday after publicly protesting that Dalit will only receive 6 percent of the 497 seats in the Assembly.

Outside Nepal, leaders of the Nepali diaspora, including the Dalit, are seeking renewed support for an online petition which calls on the government to permit them to vote in the elections. The petition has been signed by almost 3,000 Nepalis in over 80 countries. It describes the right to vote as "a fundamental right that should be given to all Nepali citizens, regardless of where they live."

Six Advocacy Project Peace Fellows are volunteering in Nepal this summer and blogging about their work. Tassos Coulaloglou, Nicole Farkouh, Jeff Yarborough and Mark Koenig are volunteering in COCAP's four regional offices. Devin Greenleaf and Ted Samuel are working for Dalit rights at the Jagaran Media Center.

- Read the [blogs](#) of AP Peace Fellows.
- Visit [COCAP's partner page](#).
- [Sign the Nepali diaspora petition](#).