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DALIT JOURNALISTS EXPOSE CASTE DISCRIMINATION IN NEPAL'S VILLAGES AS NATIONAL DALIT PROTESTS ESCALATE

August 14, 2007, Kathmandu: Throughout rural Nepal, members of the Dalit minority risk being raped, barred from temples, segregated at school and denied legal protection – all on the basis of caste. But increasingly, Dalit are also organizing to claim their rights, according to a new e-bulletin from the Jagaran Media Center (JMC), a leading Dalit advocacy group.

The newsletter is written by ten leading Dalit journalists around the country and offers a unique and authentic view of the daily struggle for Dalit rights in Nepal's communities. The journalists and their JMC editor, Prakash Mohara, were assisted by two Peace Fellows from the Advocacy Project (AP) who are volunteering with the JMC this summer. Profiles of the Dalit journalists can be found on the AP and JMC websites.

The launch of the newsletter coincided last week with the start of a national campaign of civil disobedience by Dalit activists in Kathmandu, which led to the arrest of 60 protesters. Dalit also launched a 24-hour hunger strike in front of parliament on Monday.

Dalit advocates understand that their protest could alienate the main political parties and unsettle the political climate in the run-up to crucial November elections, which will elect a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution. But this is outweighed by growing alarm that Dalit are being sidelined in the political debate.

Although they make up 20% of the population, Dalit have only been guaranteed 6% of the seats in the new Assembly, and advocates fear this will not be enough to build strong provisions against caste into the new Constitution. 80% of Nepal's Dalit live below the poverty line and only 23% of all Dalit are literate – well below the national average.

Even if the constitution contains strong protections, the new e-bulletin shows that discrimination will be hard to dislodge in villages. Writing from Pokhara, reporter Prem Nepali profiles 150 landless families who have labored for years to cultivate barren land, only to see it arbitrarily claimed by a rich family. Another contributor, Bhola Paswan, writes about a 43 year old Dalit woman who was raped and died because she was reluctant to report the assault.

Maya Sing Nepali reports that Arun Marik, a Dalit boy, left school in Janakpur after just four days because he was identified as lower caste by the teacher and forced to sit in the corner. A second article by Ms Sing Nepali concerns the case of a Dalit family that fled after villagers tried to force them to eat from the carcass of a dead animal.

At the same time, the reporters makes it clear that Dalit are increasingly prepared to mobilize against such persecution. In Dangadi region, villages forced the local police chief to take up the case of a 13-year old Dalit girl who was raped. In another case, a local anti-landmine group is supporting a Dalit woman who lost both legs to a Maoist bomb near Chitwan two years ago.

Dalit advocates feel that disseminating such information from the grassroots will inform the national debate, and that the involvement of Dalit journalists will give the publication added authenticity.

They also hope that the information can be picked up and used by advocates in the Nepali Dalit diaspora, which is increasingly active on behalf of Dalit rights in the homeland. The launch of the new newsletter was welcomed yesterday by the Nepali-American Society for Oppressed Community (NASO), a group in the United States that is lobbying for 20 percent of Nepal's development aid to be earmarked for Dalit.

- To subscribe to the new JMC publication email info@jagaranmedia.org.np
- Read the blogs of AP Peace Fellows Devin Greeleaf <http://advocacynet.org/author/devin/> and Ted Samuel <http://advocacynet.org/author/ted/>
- For information about NASO visit <http://nasocommunity.org/>

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