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Press briefing in Geneva: Thursday, August 11, 1:45 p.m. – 3 p.m.,
Rm. 25 (XXV) Palais des Nations

Caste Discrimination Root Cause of Conflict in Nepal

New report documents the impact of the civil war on Dalits

(Geneva, August 11, 2005): Caste discrimination is a root cause and an insidious consequence of the civil war in Nepal, the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice charged in a new report released today. The conflict will remain unresolved without a sustained commitment to ending caste-based abuses.

The 65-page report, titled “The Missing Piece of the Puzzle: Caste Discrimination and the Conflict in Nepal,” exposes the as yet undocumented impact of the civil war on Nepal’s most vulnerable citizens: Dalits or so-called untouchables. The report was released in Geneva today during the two-week meeting of the U.N. Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights.

The Maoists have capitalized on caste and gender discrimination in Nepal by heavily recruiting Dalits and women for their “people’s militia.” Maoist indoctrination often includes a special emphasis on the oppression of the “lower castes,” and the Maoists’ alleged role in liberating them. The dismantling of the educational system also has fed large numbers of children into the militia.

Once recruited, Dalits are relegated to the lower ranks of the movement and are, in effect, taking the bullets for the Maoist insurgency. Coupled with reports that the practice of “untouchability” and sexual abuse against Dalit women persists even within the ranks of the Maoist movement, evidence shows that Dalits have begun to feel extremely alienated and underserved by the movement that purports to liberate them.

“The ‘People’s War’ has turned on the very people it purported to empower; Dalits have proven to be the favored victim of both State forces and Maoists,” said Smita Narula, Executive Director of the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice.

The militarization of the conflict has exacerbated caste dynamics and the resulting abuses against Dalits in Nepal. The overwhelming majority of senior officers in the RNA continue to hail from “upper-caste” communities. While individual Dalit men and women have actively joined Maoist forces, Dalit communities as a whole are collectively and summarily punished by state agents, even when there is no evidence of their involvement in the insurgency.

Caste-based profiling is also a common occurrence at security check posts and during village interrogation round-ups. The burgeoning presence of the police and army in the villages has led to even greater sexual abuse and exploitation of Dalit women. The State has also armed upper-caste village militias—or village defense committees—whose members abuse their power to settle personal scores and target Dalits and religious minorities.

“Rather than fulfilling its international human rights obligations to end caste-based discrimination, the Nepalese government has branded Dalits and the poor as ‘terrorists’ and has unleashed a wave of extrajudicial killings and forced ‘disappearances’ under the cover of fighting the global ‘war on terror,’” Narula stated.

Dalit civilians also face discrimination and egregious abuses at the hands of Maoists. Maoists openly murder and publicly torture those individuals they have deemed to be adversaries of their movement and have ravaged the civilian population throughout the countryside with tactics that include sexual assault and forced overnight stays in Dalit homes.

Through the ongoing efforts of international human rights NGOs, the United Nations, and the European Union, Nepal is increasingly under scrutiny for egregious human rights violations committed by state security forces and Maoist insurgents. “The international community is trying to treat the symptoms without diagnosing the disease,” Narula added. “A focus on caste discrimination is notably absent from international interventions in Nepal.”

On February 1, 2005 King Gyanendra declared a state of emergency in Nepal and vested all executive authority in the monarchy. Hundreds of journalists, students, and activists have since been detained. Though the state of emergency has been formally lifted, severe restrictions on the media and civil society remain in place, making it increasingly difficult to monitor human rights abuses in Nepal.

The Center for Human Rights and Global Justice called on the Nepalese government to restore civil liberties and fulfill its human rights obligations to end caste-based discrimination. The Center also called on the Maoist leadership to respect applicable international standards regarding protection of Dalit human rights.

The report is based on primary research conducted in nearly thirty districts in Nepal over a period of two-and-a-half years between July 2001 and May 2005. The research has been substantiated and corroborated by reputable human rights defenders and caste discrimination experts in Nepal.

The U.N. Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) have paid increasing attention to caste discrimination in recent years. CERD Member Morten Kjærum and Sub-Commission Special Rapporteurs Chin Sung Chung and Yozo Yokota helped launch the report in cooperation with the International Dalit Solidarity Network (www.idsn.org) and Anti-Slavery International (www.antislavery.org)

The report, which includes recent photographs of the conflict and political upheaval in Nepal, can be accessed at: www.nyuhr.org/nepalreport.htm