



Covering events from January - December 2000

BHUTAN

Kingdom of Bhutan

Head of state: King Jigme Singye Wangchuck

Head of government: Yeshi Zimba (replaced Sangay Ngedup in August)

Capital: Thimphu

Population: 0.6 million

Official language: Dzongkha

Death penalty: abolitionist in practice



Amid increased international attention, there was a breakthrough in negotiations between Bhutan and Nepal on the right of almost 100,000 Nepali-speaking people in refugee camps in eastern Nepal to return to Bhutan. Torture by police was reported. Leaders of political parties in exile were reportedly arrested on their return.

Background

Finance Minister Yeshi Zimba took office as Chairman to the Council of Ministers in August. A new system of "security clearance certificates", issued by the Royal Bhutan Police, replaced "no objection certificates" and "police clearance certificates". However, there were continuing concerns that members of the Nepali-speaking community would continue to face discrimination when applying for such certificates in order to be able to obtain work, promotion or business licences or to travel abroad, on the basis that they had contacts with "anti-nationals" in refugee camps in Nepal. As part of strengthening the country's legal framework, new charge-sheets were introduced on which police must enter the sections of the law under which a person is to be charged.

Nepali-speaking refugees

Several high-level delegations visited the country to discuss with the authorities the plight of people living in refugee camps in Nepal since the early 1990s. Among them were US State Department officials who visited in January and December.

After her visit in April, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported that Bhutan was ready to proceed with joint verification of people living in the camps to determine their eligibility for inclusion in a future voluntary repatriation program. However, in May the ninth round of ministerial talks between Bhutan and Nepal failed to reach agreement. Bhutan's position was that individuals over the age of

18 should be verified individually while Nepal wanted the unit of verification to be the head of the family. A compromise formula, put forward by the High Commissioner was initially rejected by Bhutan. In late December, Nepal and Bhutan finally reached an agreement on the mechanisms and unit of verification. A joint verification team - consisting of five officials from each government - was mandated to first validate the family units and then proceed to verify heads of families and individual units.

In September the European Parliament passed a resolution calling on "the Governments of Bhutan and Nepal, in cooperation with all parties involved, to reach an agreement which will allow the early and voluntary repatriation of the refugees to their country of origin".

Torture

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Torture by police was reported.

- Tul Man Tamang, a 30-year-old construction worker, was arrested on 27 June on suspicion of organizing political activities. He was taken to the police station at Chimakothi in Chhukha district where he was allegedly kicked and beaten with a cane, leather belt and rifle butt on his back, legs and buttocks. He was reportedly held incommunicado in a dark cell for three days before being taken to the police station at Phuntsholing on the border with India. He was forced to sign a statement saying he was leaving the country of his own free will and was forcibly exiled to India.

Arrests of politicians

Several leaders of political parties in exile who returned to Bhutan were arrested. Some remained held at the end of the year.

- N.L. Katwal, a central committee member of the Bhutan Gorkha National Liberation Front, was reportedly among more than 50 people arrested during a demonstration in Phuntsholing in April.
- Ugyen Tenzing, a member of the Druk-Yul Peoples Democratic Party, was reportedly arrested in Samtse district in June and taken to Thimphu police headquarters.

AI country report

- Bhutan: Nationality, Expulsion, Statelessness and the Right to Return (AI Index: [ASA 14/001/2000](#))