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COMMUNIQUE DE PRESSE - COMUNICADO DE PRENSA

13 November 2003

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NEPAL SHOULD ABANDON PLANS FOR CIVILIAN MILITIAS

Plans announced by the Government to enlist civilians to perform security tasks in Nepal's civil war could enormously aggravate an already dire human rights situation and place the lives of rural Nepalis in grave jeopardy.

In a major policy statement addressing "future goals, strategy and plan of action", Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa announced on 4 November that the Government would be instituting "Rural Volunteer Security Group and Peace Committees" for the purpose of "promoting the role of the general citizens in maintaining peace and security."

"Civilian militias have had catastrophic human rights consequences wherever they have been employed", said ICJ Legal Adviser Ian Seiderman. "Nepal should not repeat the mistakes experienced in such countries as Guatemala and Algeria."

The ICJ considers that non-professional security forces will function beyond accountability and could lead to uncontrolled vigilante activity. Moreover, while nominally voluntary, the militias may become de facto obligatory because those who decline to join may be viewed with suspicion and become the targets of persecution.

The ICJ is also concerned that a plan announced in the statement to establish a "human rights promotion centre" under the direct supervision of the Prime Minister will undermine the independent National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). Government controlled human rights bodies, such as the non-functional "human rights cells" instituted in the armed forces and police are clearly inappropriate to undertake national human rights work.

Since the collapse of the cease-fire in August, there has been a renewed waive of extrajudicial killings, disappearances and arbitrary arrests, particularly by the armed forces. The ICJ has repeatedly stressed the urgent need for human rights monitoring in conjunction with UN assistance to address the human rights crisis. The NHCR has proposed a human rights accord, which would provide the basis for such monitoring. The key elements of the accord should be implemented with or without a formal peace settlement.

For further information, please contact: Ian Seiderman at 41-22-979-3823

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