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Talks on the return of Nepali-speaking people from southern Bhutan living in refugee camps in Nepal resumed in September. Freedom of expression continued to be restricted. Prisoner of conscience Tek Nath Rizal, who had spent more than 10 years in prison, was released in December following an amnesty granted by the King.

Background

The National Assembly approved regulations governing the devolution of executive power to an elected Council of Ministers and a mechanism to register a vote of confidence in the King. Several laws were passed, strengthening the country's limited legal framework, and a training program for judges and legal advisers continued.

Nepali-speaking refugees

More than 90,000 Nepali-speaking people from southern Bhutan continued to live in refugee camps in eastern Nepal. The UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights reiterated its concern in August at the lack of progress in negotiating a solution, and urged the governments of Bhutan and Nepal to seek assistance from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

During the eighth round of bilateral talks in September both governments made some progress in defining the categories of people who would be eligible for return, and reportedly discussed the mechanism for the verification process.

AI submitted a memorandum to the governments of Bhutan and Nepal outlining the application of international standards governing nationality, statelessness and repatriation. It called for the resettlement programs to be carried out so as not to jeopardize the refugees' return to land to which they may have legitimate claim.

Several Bhutanese political organizations based in Nepal and India, including the Druk National Congress (DNC), continued to campaign for democracy and the return of Nepali-speaking refugees. The leader of the DNC, Rongthong Kunley Dorji, continued to face extradition to Bhutan from India.

Nepali-speaking communities in Bhutan continued to face discrimination when obtaining police clearance to open a bank account, to travel abroad for training, to work and to send their children to school.

Freedom of expression

More than 100 people were arrested in the border town of Phuntsholing during pro-democracy demonstrations organized by the DNC and other political organizations in exile. Several protesters reportedly required hospital treatment after they were beaten by members of the security forces, but all were subsequently released.

Royal amnesty

Prisoner of conscience Tek Nath Rizal, who had spent more than 10 years in prison, was released in December following an amnesty granted by the King. Thirty-nine political prisoners from eastern and southern Bhutan were also included in the amnesty, but 119 others continued to be held at the end of 1999.

Torture

The government did not respond to AI's calls to ratify the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

* Padam Lal Giri returned to Bhutan from the refugee camps in Nepal to investigate the reported resettlement of landless people on land previously occupied by people living in the refugee camps. He was arrested in June and taken to Geylegphug police station where he was allegedly beaten, kicked and punched, and stabbed in the head with a bayonet.