

Amnesty International Reports: 1999

A prisoner of conscience held since 1989 continued to serve a life sentence. At least 30 possible prisoners of conscience were detained. Some 120 political prisoners were sentenced to up to 15 years' imprisonment. Many of those detained were reportedly tortured or ill-treated.

The 76th National Assembly voted in June to approve an edict by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck transferring executive powers to a six-member cabinet to be elected every five years.

The Druk National Congress (DNC) and the United Front for Democracy (UFD), two political organizations in exile in Nepal, continued their campaigning activities throughout the year, demanding a democratic system of government and greater respect for human rights in Bhutan.

Meetings of officials from Bhutan and Nepal were held in Thimphu in May, October and November aimed at reviving talks between the two governments on the fate of more than 90,000 mostly Nepali-speaking people from southern Bhutan living in refugee camps in eastern Nepal (see previous *Amnesty International Reports*).

In August a statement by the Chairman of the un Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities encouraged the governments of Bhutan and Nepal to set up an impartial verification process for the people in the refugee camps in Nepal and to make more effective and urgent efforts to negotiate their return.

In January, 219 civil servants and employees of government corporations were compulsorily retired as a result of a resolution adopted by the National Assembly in 1997. This was interpreted to be a discriminatory practice aimed at Nepali-speaking people from southern Bhutan, many of whom were relatives of people living in the refugee camps in eastern Nepal. At least 23 school students, aged between seven and 21, whose relatives had been arrested for supporting the pro-democracy movement, were expelled from school in eastern Bhutan.

Tek Nath Rizal, a prisoner of conscience, spent his ninth year in prison (see *Amnesty International Report 1994*).

At least 30 possible prisoners of conscience were detained, most on suspicion of being members or supporters of the dnc. They were detained under the National Security Act (nsa) 1992.

Rongthong Kunley Dorji, leader of the dnc and the ufd, was released on bail in India, while awaiting the outcome of extradition proceedings to Bhutan (see [Amnesty International Report 1998](#)).

As of early December, 120 political prisoners arrested during 1997 in the east (see [Amnesty International Report 1998](#)) had been tried under the NSA and sentenced to up to 15 years' imprisonment. Among them were Thinley Oezer, a senior monk of the Nyingmapa tradition of Mahayana Buddhism, and several other monks and religious teachers. Thinley Oezer was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment. His trial may have fallen short of international fair trial standards.

Many of those detained on suspicion of being DNC sympathizers were reportedly tortured or ill-treated. Methods included *chepuwa*, a form of torture where the thighs are compressed between two objects such as bamboo sticks, and severe beatings. Needup Phuntsho, a 19-year-old pupil who had been expelled from school in March, was reportedly tortured by members of the Royal Bhutan Police following his arrest in Thimphu in July.

Amnesty International continued to appeal for the immediate and unconditional release of Tek Nath Rizal; for political prisoners to be released unless promptly charged with a recognizably criminal offence; and for fair trials for all political prisoners. The organization also appealed for an end to torture and ill-treatment.

In November an Amnesty International delegation visited the country and met the King and Chairman of the Council of Ministers and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lyonpo Jigme Thinley, to discuss the organization's concerns and make recommendations for the protection of human rights. The delegates visited Mongar and Tashigang districts in the east and Sarbhang district in the south