



OCHA Nepal - Fortnightly Situation Overview

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Highlights:

- Tensions and confrontations rise as Election Day draws closer
- Prime Minister announces post-election departure from politics, while leadership outlook is uncertain
- Armed Terai groups continue to threaten candidates, poll workers and announce bandhs
- Youth Communist League (YCL) and other groups reportedly disrupting political parties' activities
- Operational space not affected by electoral tensions.
- UN helicopter flights resume after fatal crash
- Protest returns of some 10,000 wildlife reserve-IDPs in Kanchanpur district triggers crisis
- OCHA observes lack of flood preparedness, health crises and food insecurity

CONTEXT

Politics and election preparations

During the first two weeks of March, the political scene in Nepal was dominated by electioneering, as tensions rose between political parties and their supporters. The electoral tempo has picked up further momentum after the end of the February agitation in the Terai, the subsequent submission of lists of candidates by over a dozen political parties, including various Terai-based ones, and the publication of the parties' manifestos. This now brings the total number of parties competing in the proportional representation race to 54. While the pre-electoral process has thus entered its final phase, questions also arose on the immediate steps after the elections.

Uncertainty still affects the process in many ways. Prime Minister (PM) Koirala has proposed that a coalition government should be formed after the Constituent Assembly elections, whatever the election results. He also announced that he would hand over the party leadership to the new generation after the April polls. The three major political parties, Nepali Congress (NC), the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) and the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) hold divergent views on how to elect the new head of state and whether it will be a ceremonial or an executive head.

Additional nominations filed following the agreements between the Government and the United Democratic Madhesi Front (UDMF) and the Federal Republican National Front (FRNF) include independent candidates and those from the Rastriya Janshakti Party (RJP), Rastriya Prajatantra Party Nepal (RPPN), Tarai Madhes Loktantrik Party (TMLP), Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) and Sadbhawana Party (SP), among others, who had boycotted the process earlier. The Nepal Samata Party, Nawa Janabadi Morcha and Kirat Workers Party also filed their nominations. Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), Rastriya Janashakti Party (RJP) and RPP-Nepal have reached a tacit understanding not to contest against each other, but the Madhesi groups, which recently staged joint protests in the Terai, have failed to forge an effective alliance for now.

Three major political parties have fielded candidates for the First-Past-the-Post race in all 240 constituencies. Six parties, including the RPP, have fielded candidates in more than 200 constituencies. The final list of candidates for the proportional representation race was made public by the Election Commission (EC) on 17 March.

The Election Commission has expressed concern over the security situation in some districts in Terai and urged the Government to take immediate action to ensure proper security for the election. The two major risks at this stage appear to be the potential for violent clashes between political parties on the campaign trail and the continued opposition of armed Terai groups against the elections, and their persistent threats against or attacks on state representatives and institutions. CPN/Maoist cadres and YCL have been accused of disrupting or preventing other parties' campaign activities throughout the country. However other parties have also been involved in clashes, yet media coverage has not always been accurate in this regard.

The main threat is being posed by Janatantrik Terai Mukti Morcha Jwalasingh (JTMM-J), All Terai Liberation Front (ATLF, the renamed Goit faction of JTMM), Madhesi Liberation Tigers (MLT) and the Liberation of Terai Tiger Elam, all of which have threatened candidates if they did not withdraw. The government has deputed three police personnel with one weapon to each candidate of the Constituent Assembly election to provide them security during the campaigning upon request.

A number of armed groups have indicated willingness to dialogue with the government mediated by an international organization. But the PM ruled out any possibility of holding talks with the agitating Terai-based armed groups ahead of the Constituent Assembly polls.

The leaders of the CPN/M have given contradictory messages on whether or not they would accept a verdict by the people, or would launch another uprising.



Photo credit: OCHA Nepal

Generally, the UN's Special Representative to the Secretary-General (SRSG) Ian Martin expressed hope that all the parties would accept the result of the elections to lead Nepal to peace. Martin also warned that the international community would have no sympathy with any group which carries out acts of violence in pursuit of its grievances or in attempts to disrupt the electoral process. In view of mounting incidents of violations to the electoral Code of Conduct, the EC warned parties that if candidates — cabinet ministers in particular — continued to use state privileges for political campaigns; it would be forced to act.

In another worrying development, scuffles between party cadres during campaigning have increased, with the CPN/M behind several reported attacks on candidates. After failing to agree on a leftist alliance, altercations between the CPN/M and the UML appear to have increased sharply. CPN/M and YCL cadres have also been reported to obstruct campaigning by other parties, particularly those associated with the royal regime.

Nearly every day, there are reports of YCL intimidating voters and threatening, obstructing or simply attacking political rivals. On 12 March, a significant clash between supporters of UML and the Maoists occurred in Ramechhap district, injuring 12 UML cadres. Four UML cadres were hurt when YCL cadres attacked a UML gathering at Taparsu VDC in Dhading district on 15 March. On 16 March, an NC candidate was attacked by CPN-Maoist activists at Patale VDC of Okhaldhunga. Maoist activist pelted stones and, according to some reports, fired at the NC campaigners before fleeing under fire from security forces. One NC activist was critically injured in the attack.

On 14 March, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) stated that the attacks on political cadres in Ramechhap district, in which at least four persons were seriously hurt, a killing in Arghakhanchi District and reported abductions of cadres in Chitwan and Dhankuta were serious impediments to creating an environment conducive to free and fair elections in which the will of the people is expressed.

In Terai region, activists of the Madheshi Janadhikar Forum disrupted the election meeting of NC candidate Sujata Koirala, minister without portfolio and daughter of the PM, at Laukahi of Sunsari district and forced her to leave abruptly. On 15 March, the Nepal Defence Army claimed responsibility for the abduction of a candidate of the Nepal Rastriya Bikas Party from Biratnagar, Morang. On 16 March, an armed gang was reported to have abducted CPN/M candidate along with six other Maoist cadres at Bodebasain VDC of Saptari district while campaigning.

The Election Commission has instructed the government to take action against election candidates and party workers involved in beating up rival party workers and obstructing the elections.

Safety and Security

Violent resistance against the electoral process has taken the form of explosions, threats and abductions. JTMM-J has claimed responsibility for a pressure cooker blast in Nepalgunj on 2 March at the house of an NC worker. On 4 March, members of the Madheshi Liberation Tigers (MLT) reportedly abducted and shot dead an NC worker in Mahottari district. Also in Mahottari district a businessman was found dead sixteen days after he had been abducted on 26 February. Various armed and unarmed Terai-based groups have been forcing government offices and businesses into paying

donations in Sunsari district. VDC secretaries in Kapilvastu district have been operating from the district headquarters after various armed Terai groups threatened them demanding donations. Two policemen, who were abducted by Madheshi Mukti Tigers (MMT) from Sitapur Bhangaha VDC, Mahottari on 2 March were released three days later.

A splinter faction of MPRF led by Bhagirath Gupta rejected the 28 February agreement and announced a Terai bandh to begin on 6 March. Markets and shops were reported closed in Biratnagar, but the bandh had little impact in other Terai districts. No effect of the bandh was observed in Dhanusha, Mahottari, Sarlahi, Bara and Rautahat districts. For 12 March 08, JTMM -Rajan Mukti (faction of JTMM -J) called a bandh for Jhapa, Morang, Sunsari and Saptari districts, but the effect of bandh was observed in Rajbiraj of Saptari district only. Chure Bhawar Ekta Samaj (CBES) also staged a demonstration to protest against the agreement. JTMM led by Rajan Mukti (a fraction of JTMM Jwala Singh) also launched protest program showing their dissatisfaction.

Four agitating armed groups of Terai (Terai Mukti Tigers, Terai Cobra, Janatantrik Terai Mukti Morcha and Samyukta Janatantrik Terai Mukti Morcha) have decided to form an alliance. They decided to work together to disrupt CA polls. They have also announced a programme of protests which includes detonating bombs in HQs and VDCs of the Terai on 19 March, torch and firing rallies on 20 March, physical action against CA polls candidates and staffs of the EC starting from 25 March, a Terai-wide bandh on 28/29 March, a general strike starting on 7 April, and the general prohibition of any movement on 9 and 10 April.

They have also stated that serious action will be taken against those defying the above mentioned protest programmes. While bandhs have not always had the effect intended by the organizers, localized disruptions and incidents can certainly be expected in the run up to the election day.

On 16 March, a curfew was imposed in Rajbiraj of Saptari after the applicants to the Temporary Police to be recruited for the elections vandalized vehicles and shops.

UNMIN helicopter crash

Following the fatal crash of an UNMIN helicopter carrying seven UN personnel and three crew members at Bhawansa, Bethan VDC, Ramechhap, on 3 March, investigations were being conducted by UNMIN, the Government and Governments of the country of origin of some of the victims. UN helicopter flights were suspended for almost two weeks. Based on the recommendations and continuing certification of the technical experts, UNMIN decided to resume normal passenger flights as of Saturday, 15 March.

Tibetan protests

In the morning of 17 March, approximately 250 Tibetans staged demonstrations, attempting to reach the UN House at Pulchowk, Lalitpur, but were dispersed by Nepal Police, using batons and tear gas. 16 arrests were made. In a Press Release, OHCHR expressed concern over the excessive use of force by police officers against protesters. Likewise, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC) Robert Piper stressed that "at no time have police been requested by the UN to intervene in peaceful protests in front of UN House."

Reach of the State

In a number of districts across the country, VDC Secretaries are not able or willing to operate from their VDCs. Many remain in

District Headquarters. For instance, in Baitadi, at least three VDC Secretaries operate from DHQ Baitadi and eight VDC secretaries are vacant, with neighboring VDC Secretaries assigned to look after the vacant VDCs.

Operational Space and Humanitarian Access

Feedback from District Contact Groups and other coordination meetings indicate that development and humanitarian activities generally continue to move ahead without any form of hindrance.

HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees

An estimated 2,307 households (An estimated 4,000 women; 3,000 children and 3,000 men) have setup temporary camp at Dhaka, Dhakabhuli VDC, ward no.1, in Kanchanpur District of Far Western Region.

They were displaced by a Wildlife Reserve Expansion Project in 2002 and had since then lived in 14 temporary camps in seven VDCs (Pipaladi, Dekhatbhuli, Rautali, Beldadi, Sundarpur, Suda, Krishnapur, Kalika and Laxmipur).



Photo credit: OCHA Nepal

In 2002, the Shuklaphata Wild Life Reserve Office had forcefully moved the occupants off the land for the extension of the wildlife reserve boundary. Compensation was not provided immediately and the displaced families set up camps in 14 sites across Kanchanpur District. The demands for compensation and resettlement were not met. Two months ago, the Committee decided to return to the land that they previously occupied to pressure the government for compensation for land lost in 2002.

For almost 60 days, the 2,307 households have lived in ad hoc structures, mostly made of scrap branches, used cloth and plastic. Their situation is increasingly desperate, in particular related to health concerns. Cold and flu have affected the majority of the population. The community reported over five cold-related deaths in the past two weeks. The hospital is located two hours away by vehicle. One month ago, the people received de-worming tablets, iron tablets and re-hydration tablets from the health service. The polio campaign has not covered this site in the past two months. Over 100 women are reported pregnant (with 8 newly born babies). After having used the river for drinking water and cleaning the community has set-up ten hand-pumps for water supply.

There is a complete lack of livelihoods and of food supplies. Only a small number of livestock has been observed in the area. The community has established a school for levels 1-3. Older children are starting to return to their previous schools.

OCHA's rapid assessment team observed that many primary school aged children were not attending school. The CDO of Kanchanpur requested immediate support in responding to the humanitarian needs of the IDPs. OCHA is seeking support from health organizations to conduct a needs assessment of the site, with the possibility of setting up a mobile health centre or providing immediate health assistance.

IDP returns

Altogether 88 members of 25 families in Humla, Jumla, Achham, Kailali, Surkhet, Mugu, Dang, Kalikot and Dailekh districts who were displaced during the insurgency were reported to have returned home on the initiative of the Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC), a human rights group. Local and international aid agencies struggling to get IDPs back to their homes are concerned about an alleged lack of government interest in their plight. Some 35,000-50,000 people are still displaced in various cities and towns, despite the end of the 1996-2006 armed conflict, according to estimates by agencies dealing with IDPs.

IDPs say it is not so much security which is the main obstacle to their return but the government's refusal to recognize most of them as IDPs. According to the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), which works with IDPs in 15 districts, the number of displaced families yet to be officially registered is growing.

NRC officials explained that those who had lost the opportunity to register their names with the government were now desperately seeking help from the NRC and INSEC. NRC has already registered over 1,000 families (nearly 5,000 people) as IDPs, and every week 10-15 more are added. NRC also pointed to the fact that most of these persons were unaware of their status as IDPs and many of them had no access to relevant information, and recommended the government to set up a proper system for effective IDP reintegration.

The government's Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction told IRIN that it has been making serious efforts to help the IDPs. The ministry had disbursed US\$5.6 million to district administration offices all over the country to provide relief aid to displaced families. The government estimated that nearly 35,000 IDPs would get such support. But IDP experts are concerned that the government's lack of monitoring means most relief packages fail to reach the neediest IDPs.

Bhutanese refugees

On 1 March, a fire at the Goldhap Refugee camp in Jhapa district destroyed 1,284 dwellings. (See: OCHA Situation Report, Goldhap Bhutanese Refugee Camp Destroyed by Fire, 10 March 2008). UNHCR and the office of the CDO of Jhapa have been coordinating the humanitarian response. Action needs to be taken soon to rebuild dwellings before the onset of the monsoon in June.

The first group of Bhutanese refugees (20 refugees of three families) left Nepal for the United States on 10 March after living 17 years in refugee camps in eastern Nepal. Some 106,000 Bhutanese refugees are still in seven camps in Jhapa and Morang districts and await resettlement in the coming years.

Protection

The High Commissioner for Human Rights submitted her annual report on the human rights situation in Nepal to the Human Rights Council on 7 March. The report notes progress in some areas, including strengthening of the National Human

Rights Commission, development of a national human rights legal framework, and increasing representation of marginalized groups and women in the civil service, police force and army. However, the report also finds that respect for and the protection of human rights came under increasing pressure in 2007 as a result of delays in implementing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, as well as a worsening security situation in the Terai.

Food crisis

While in the past two weeks the supply situation of basic goods has eased further, 8-14 hour load-shedding (power outages) daily, record high food and fuel prices and the scarcity of essential items continue to cause severe challenges to many families, in particular vulnerable groups such as female-headed households and families in remote areas.

Flood preparedness

In Tikapur (Kailali) OCHA visited flood affected communities and observed a lack of preparedness and mitigation/prevention. The land is affected by thick layers of sand sediment, which prevents communities are from sowing crops. Lack of solid infrastructure also cut off a part of the village, preventing access to markets and schools. The impact of floods is increasing annually due to deforestation increasing sedimentation in the valleys. OCHA is working with District Disaster Relief Committees (DDRC) in order to ensure optimal preparedness for the coming monsoon season.

First aid preparedness

In the run of to the CA election there is need of the first aid in each polling station. The Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS) Kanchanpur requested support for additional first aid supplies for the volunteers in preparation for the CA election. NRCS will train first aid volunteers mobilized to polling centers.

Health

In Tikapur (Kailali), OCHA was informed that the Primary Health Centre (PHC) was lacking delivery facilities. It was estimated that over 70 per cent of pregnant women were anemic and mal-nutrition is severe among women and

children. Two years ago, the population was vaccinated against Japanese Encephalitis (JE), however cases still occur. There are frequent cases of pneumonia and diarrhea, and malaria is endemic. The PHC and NRCS face shortages of cold storage for blood bank emergency supplies.

In Baitadi district, health situation was reported relatively stable according due to the government's policy on free medication and health treatment. Health concerns in Baitadi include gastro-intestinitis. Also, only 70 per cent of children are reportedly covered by the immunization programme. Women are increasingly traveling to health centers due to the government's Rs. 1,000-incentive for clinic births. However, cases of uterus prolapse and anemia are common.

In Dolpa, the District Hospital has been facing an acute shortage of water for the past three months, according to local media reports. More than 50 people visit the District Hospital daily. The patient's attendants have to go to the nearby Bhairabi River to fetch water. The hospital administration has informed the authorities about the problem; however it has received no response until now.

COORDINATION

New HC/RC arrived in Nepal

The new Humanitarian Coordinator/Resident Coordinator, Robert Piper, has arrived in Nepal and assumed his duties on 11 March. Mr. Piper has held meetings with the Government, senior UN officials, I/NGOs and civil society organizations and has traveled to the Eastern Region to meet with local partners, listen to community concerns, and visit UN projects.

UPCOMING EVENTS

- Next Contact Group scheduled for Wednesday, 19 March from 10:30 am - 12:00 noon at the UN Conference Room (contact: Aditee Maskey, OCHA)
- Next EHNWG meeting on Wednesday, 19 March from 14:30 am - 16:30 am (contact: Monique Beun, UNICEF), WHO Meeting Hall, UN Building

The information in this report is consolidated from media, UN, NGO, and other humanitarian partners. This report is subject to availability of data. Incidents are reported as stated by available sources. Although OCHA does its best to confirm reports independently, occasional factual inaccuracies can occur. If you have inputs for the next issue, or questions/comments on the current issue, please contact: Marcus Brand, Humanitarian Affairs Analyst on 98418 29420, brand1@un.org

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