



OCHA Nepal - Fortnightly Situation Overview

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Highlights:

- Fuel price increases lead to nationwide protests and strikes by students, transport entrepreneurs
- Food crisis makes 2.5 million people in need of emergency food aid, says WFP market study
- Floods and landslides begin earlier than usual with a monsoon ahead of schedule
- Formation of new government drags on as Maoists leave interim government; SPA passes decision-making to CA
- Operational space remains brittle, with rising levels of crime and extortion in Terai districts
- Resettlement continues amidst continued tension among refugees

CONTEXT

Political situation

Following ex-king Gyanendra Shah's departure from the palace on 11 June to live temporarily at a state-owned residence, the former royal residence was transformed into the Narayanhiti Palace Museum. The Constituent Assembly (CA) has met four times, but has not been fully constituted yet, as five seats need to be reelected, and 26 members have yet to be appointed by the government. Also two cases remain before the CA Court so 568 members have been sworn in to date. Meanwhile, a protracted power-struggle between the major parties has held up the election of a president as the new head of state, as well as the formation of a new government.

Intensive consultations among the parties have failed to resolve the issues of power-sharing, although a compromise appears to have been reached over a number of previously contentious issues. The parties, meeting the Seven Party Alliance format, however, failed to reach consensus over the structure of the National Defense Council, and a few issues on integration/adjustment of the Nepali Army (NA) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

The controversy climaxed on 20 June in the CPN/M's (Maoists) decision to pull out of the interim government still led by Nepali Congress (NC) leader Prime Minister (PM) Girija Prasad Koirala, who has stated he would resign only if and as soon as a new head of state is in place. CPN/M has announced it may launch a new 'people's struggle' in order to break the deadlock and has found a partner in the Communist Party Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) on some key issues.

On 20 June, the leaders of the CPN/M and the UML reportedly reached an agreement to support each other for the posts of PM of the next government and president respectively. The NC said it will not be a part of such a Maoist-led government and would rather stay in opposition.

Earlier, the Maoists had accepted conditions put forward by the other major parties, including the rules on electing the President, Vice-President, Prime Minister, Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the CA; the principle of a simple majority to remove the PM; a constitutional provision for the opposition leader's representation in the Constitutional Council; the adjustment of PLA members after completing a standard selection process on an individual basis into the Nepal Army (NA) within six months; the change of the structure of the Young Communist League (YCL); and the return of all properties held by the Maoists within 15 days.

The formation of interim local bodies is also stalled, as the NC together with the smaller Seven Party Alliance members (CPN-ML, People's Front Nepal, Nepal Workers and Peasants Party and Sadbhawana Party) proposed that all political parties in the CA should have participation in such bodies while the Maoists and UML said representatives of only major political parties should be represented in VDCs, Municipalities and DDCs.

On 24 June, the SPA finally agreed to hand over the decision on the remaining contentious issues to the Constituent Assembly, which was going to meet again on 25 June. They expressed the expectation that PM Koirala would resign in the coming days, and a new government would be formed following the election of a president by a simple majority in the CA, with the NC most likely staying in opposition. Nepal's main political parties have also reportedly agreed to extend the term of the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) by another six months while proposing to reduce its mandate.

While the negotiations among party leaders to form a new government carry on, the country has been gripped by a series of protests and strikes, both on a national level due to fuel-price-related *bandhs* by students and transport entrepreneurs, and by a wave of smaller scale outbursts of anger and frustration.

Following the government's decision to raise fuel prices by 25% two weeks ago, it authorized transport entrepreneurs to follow suit accordingly, but limited their price hikes to 25% as well. Transporters demanded a raise of at least 35%, while students demanded a 50% discount, which transporters vehemently opposed. In the past two weeks, these conflicting demands have led to a series of *bandhs* and confrontations. While students gave in on 22 June after being offered a 45% discount (after defying an offer of 43% for almost two weeks), the negotiations between transport entrepreneurs and the government continued until 24 June.

After the Nepal Transport Entrepreneurs National Federation (NTENF) had decided to stage an indefinite transport strike across the country to press the government to fulfill their demand to raise fares by 35%, thousands of passengers were stranded across Nepal for several days as transport operators locked public buses and other vehicles in garages. On 24 June, the government conceded a package including a 28% fare increase, thus ending the strikes for now. A number of other groups have, however, announced protests for the coming days.

Adding to the difficulties, the Nepal Petroleum Dealers' Association (NPDA) stopped the distribution of fuel nationwide, while the Petroleum Tankers' Association stopped transporting oil products demanding an increase in the fare of tankers. Petrol stations reopened on 25 June after the government agreed to raise the fares of tankers.

Before they agreed to call off their agitation, the students' protests had caused considerable disruption across the country, in particular the Kathmandu Valley. Transportation on major roads was affected due to the strikes and clashes erupted between the police and students after the police attempted to clear the roads. On 20 June, protesters threw rocks and destroyed windows of the government car of Nepal's Chief Justice Kedar Prasad Giri, who was unhurt and managed to escape to a nearby building. A police jeep was also set on fire.

The students have now reportedly demanded 50% discounts at all health institutions and on daily consumer goods. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has called on all concerned authorities to put off their agitation and ease the livelihood of the common people.

Violence between party supporters and by militant youth organizations affiliated to political parties was less frequently reported during the period. However, a number of reports emerged over Maoist cadres allegedly preventing contractors other than those close to the Maoists from submitting tender applications for a number of contracts called by District Development Committees (DDCs), as well as manhandling students and teachers in a few cases.

Safety and Security

Criminal activities involving different Terai armed groups, Hindu fundamentalists and other extremists operating in the Terai remain an immediate security concern. Also Maoists were reported to have committed a number of offenses. It has also been noticed that criminal activities like murder and robbery have increased in Kathmandu recently.

Improvised explosive device (IED) explosions, killings, abductions, and extortion threats were again frequently reported, in particular from the Terai districts that are most seriously affected by armed group activities. On 11 June, a teacher and five students were injured when an IED exploded at a Secondary School of Sakhuawa Dhamaura VDC of Rautahat. On 13 June, two Bombs were detonated in a vegetable market at Pokhariya of Birgunj, Parsa, by a group called Hindu Sena Nepal.

On 14 June, two persons were killed and 18 others including four children were injured when a 5kg pipe bomb exploded at a busy bus park in Chandranigahapur of Rautahat district along the East West Mahendra highway. Two of the injured lost their legs in the explosion while others also sustained serious injuries. The Terai Army has claimed responsibility for the bombing. On 15 June, Madheshi Virus Killers Party (MVKP) cadres detonated an IED at a local drug store at Bhardaha of Saptari blaming the pharmacist for defying their strike call, injuring a bystander. On 16 June, the Terai Army detonated a pipe bomb at a restaurant at Niḡgadh of Bara along the East West highway. On 15 June, at least 12 passengers were injured in an explosion on a public bus from Dharan to Kathmandu at Paurataha VDC of Saptari. MVKP claimed responsibility for the explosion.

On 18 June an employee of Surya Nepal Cigarette Factory was killed in Pipra Simara of Bara by Jwala Singh led Janatantrik Terai Mukti Morcha (JTMM-J). On 21 June, JTMM (Rajan Mukti) cadres detonated a bomb at a jewellery shop in Janakpur of Dhanusha injuring one. On 22 June, an unidentified group shot dead the principal of a Secondary School in Sakhuwa Mahendranagar VDC of Dhanusha after having abducted him. Rupandehi and Kapilvastu district also saw a rise in criminal cases, including three murders reported in recent days. On 20 June, JTMM (Rajan Mukti) exploded

bombs in two separate places in Mahottari and on 21 June a woman was injured when an IED exploded at a temple in Janakpur.

Bandhs, roadblocks

The number of roadblocks, *bandhs*, *chakka-jams*, sit-in protests and similar actions of discontent has multiplied over the recent period and have affected normal life considerably, even though this form of publicly expressing discontent is considered normal by local standards.

Beginning with 20 June, students and transporters both burnt tires and brought vehicular movement to a halt in several parts of Kathmandu valley and several rural districts. No public vehicular movement was observed in Kathmandu Valley on 22 June due to the indefinite public transportation strike called by Transport Entrepreneurs in the Bagmati Zone from 21 June onwards, which expanded all over the country from 23 June onwards. Long-distance transportation was also affected due to the strike. On 24 June, six tourist busses were reportedly vandalized by 'strike enforcing' transport workers near Pokhara, injuring two tourists.

Protests also erupted on a local level for a variety of reasons, leading to considerable disruptions in some parts of the country. On 13 June, law practitioners demanding the appointment of a Madhesi as district court judge in Siraha went on strike for several days, halting hearings at the court. In Dang, stationary supply shops closed for business from 19 June demanding security and compensation for damages caused by the students' protest programme. In a number of locations, protests by landless groups or disadvantaged caste groups led to roadblocks and obstructions. On 17 June, eighteen persons including five policemen were injured in a clash between Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) supporters and police in Kalaiya of Bara. On 24 June, students in Siraha called for an indefinite general strike stating that the local administration did not comply with the agreements reached earlier concerning the recent mysterious death of a university student.

On 19 June, locals and employees of Surya Nepal created a roadblock in Bara district protesting against the murder of a co-worker by JTMM. The employees called for an indefinite transportation strike in the area, compensation to the family, declaration of the victim as a martyr and the arrest of those involved. Road blocks by Maoists were also reported in other areas in support of the protests.

On 17 June, CPN/M Forest Minister Yadav allegedly locked the Lalitpur district Local Development Officer in the toilet of his office for allowing a boulder mine at Lalitpur community forest. In protest against this action, the NC along with employees of the Lalitpur DDC called for a district transportation strike. On 19 June, civil servants closed down local bodies nationwide demanding a public apology, bringing the services of the local bodies (VDC, Municipality and DDC) across most of the country to a standstill.

On 21 June, around 200 junior Armed Police Force (APF) personnel of Bageshwori Battalion based at Sumshergunj in Banke took the battalion's 17 officers hostage and beat them up for allegedly behaving inappropriately and providing them with indecent food, but released them two days later after reaching a 22-point agreement with the Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Frequently, road accidents also resulted in spontaneous roadblocks. On 23 June, a 15-year old girl died and 15 others were injured when a passenger bus turned over at Bardibas of Mahottari on the East-West Highway. Local students called a

transportation strike in Bardibas along East-West Highway after the incident.

Reach of the State

Due to the expiry of the fiscal year in a few days, local bodies have made increased efforts to release VDC, municipality and DDC development funds in recent weeks. In some cases, the functioning of local bodies was affected by protests, however.

On 13 June, the Kalikot DDC office in Manma was vandalized by the CPN/M following a clash between the CPN-M and the representatives of other political parties. The CPN-M cadres were demanding the withdrawal of the Upper Karnali Hydropower Agreement. On 16 June, the local community in Payal VDC of Achham conducted a sit-in protest against the long absence of their VDC Secretary. On the same day, VDC secretaries of Udayapur district, who are on a strike to press for their four-point demand including security, boycotted the DDC meeting. The agitating VDC secretaries have been halting all work at their respective VDC offices for a week. On 19 June, demanding additional facilities, staff of the Tikapur Development Committee organized a sit-in-protest in front of their office in Kailali.

Meanwhile, the difficulties of VDC secretaries to provide services to many communities have continued. State representatives and buildings were again subject to direct attacks by a number of defiant groups. On 22 June, the Terai Army reportedly detonated a powerful bomb at the Malangawa Municipality building of Sarlahi, damaging the building but not causing any casualties. On the same day, an unidentified gang abducted the VDC secretary of Janakinagar of Siraha.

Kirat groups calling for an autonomous Kirat state have been threatening VDC secretaries of Bhojpur, Khotang and Udayapur to resign as soon as possible. On 12 June, activists of Kirat Janwadi Workers Party (KJWP) burnt the documents of Dalgaun, Bhulke, Okharye and Dhodlekhan VDCs of Bhojpur and threatened the wife of the absent VDC secretary serving the four VDCs. On 13 June, the Khumbuwan Rastriya Morcha (KRM), claimed to have attacked Baadkadiyale VDC in Khotang district on 10 June, looting one rifle and 50 rounds of ammunition and injuring three policemen.

Operational Space and Humanitarian Access

There was an increase in the number of operational space related incidents throughout the country, in particular the Mid and Far West. However, most operations continue as normal.

It was reported that in mid June, CPN/M cadres blocked the drinking water source in Bagarkot VDC in Dadeldhura, accusing people of not voting CPN/M in the CA election. Consequently, people of Matela, Bagan, Kuyali, Ratani, Kathayat and adjoining VDCs faced water shortages. The NGO Helvetas, which had planned to implement a drinking water project in the VDC, reportedly ceased further planning after the incident.

HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

Protection

On 18 June, OHCHR released its report on the violence in Kapilvastu in September 2007, which led to the death of 14 people and the displacement of hundreds who still have not been able to return to their homes. Richard Bennett, head of the OHCHR Mission in Nepal said that “although some steps were taken at the local level to improve the security of the local

population, the authorities and local political leaders need to do much more to restore communities’ confidence in the State, and they should be allowed to undertake their important work free from political interference.” OHCHR also added that until impunity is addressed and respect for the rule of law re-established, it will be difficult to break the cycles of violence and impunity in Kapilvastu.

In recent weeks, media reported a series of incidents where villagers attacked persons, predominantly women, accused of witchcraft. Reports emerged of villagers mistreating four persons in Lalbandi VDC of Sarlahi on 6 June, three elderly women on 10 June in Dang, a widow of Deuri VDC of Saptari on 11 June, a teenage girl at Ramchhe Bazaar of Rasuwa on 18 June, and two women in Raghunathpur VDC of Rautahat on 20 June and in Kyaneshwor VDC of Sindhuli on 21 June.

Refugees and IDPs

As the tensions among the Bhutanese refugee community regarding the resettlement process persists, all agencies with the exception of IOM, UNHCR and WFP are requested to liaise with FSA UNHCR and FSO IOM before commencing their travel to any of the refugee camps in Jhapa and Morang.

The protracted IDP situations which international agencies have highlighted on a number of occasions persist as the monsoon season makes life in makeshift settlements even more unbearable. On 19 June OCHA and OHCHR again urged the Assistant CDO of Sunsari, to find a suitable solution for the IDPs from Haripur temporarily staying in Bangi Bazaar and Chhatara. OCHA suggested that agencies visit any proposed new site, either individually or with other agencies to assess needs and coordinate the provision of shelter, water etc. In the longer term, ICRC will also explore livelihood support.

On 14 June, Nepal police broke up a protest by Tibetan refugees in Kathmandu and temporarily detained 182 people for organizing anti-China demonstrations. On 19 June, police for the first time formally arrested and charged three Tibetan exiles in connection with the protests. Authorities said the three arrested leaders - two women and a man - were responsible for the near-daily protests since March and will be held for 90 days under Nepal’s public security act on the charge of being involved in anti-China activities. They are the president and vice-president of the Tibetan Women’s Association and the director of the Tibetan Reception Center, which helps Tibetan refugees in Nepal emigrate to India. The arrests preceded the biggest protests so far, and police stopped nearly 1,000 Tibetans from protesting outside the Chinese Embassy offices and temporarily detained more than 700. On 21 June, police again detained more than 500 Tibetan protestors in Kathmandu.

Floods and landslides

Earlier than usual, monsoon rains have begun in most of the country as of mid-June and have spread across the country more quickly than normal. The meteorological department said some places in western Nepal received as much as 250mm of rain in just a few days, well above the normal, and that the monsoon had been particularly active in western Nepal for the past two weeks. At least five districts in western and southern Nepal were affected by flooding following days of heavy rain.

On 14 June, more than 45 houses were reportedly submerged in water at Khairee Tole in Pahalmanpur VDC of Kailali. On 15 June, 60 persons from 13 families had to be rescued from flood water in Dhangadhi municipality. Similarly, Dhansighapur, Thapapur, Narayanpur, Bhajani and Lalbojhi VDCs of Kailali are also affected due to flood, as well as several areas of Dailekh

and Baitadi, where mainly minor flooding and landslides sporadically affected 1 or 2 households at a time. Two people were swept away in the Jyamire River after heavy monsoon rain caused flash floods in Dailekh district.

Hundreds of people have been affected by flash floods and landslides in other parts of the country as well. On 19 June, landslides swept away houses in several villages of Khotang, causing the displacement of 20 families. The District Disaster Relief Committee (DDRC) and the Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS) provided immediate relief. The displaced have taken shelter in school buildings and houses of relatives. A total of 250 houses are on the verge of collapse in district centre Diktel due to landslides. On 20 June, more than 1,000 of the 1,600 residents of Gobargada in Saptari have left their village with their movable belongings in search of a safe haven due to imminent flood danger from the rising Saptakosi River. On 24 June, reports said that some 1,000 households of two villages and some 600 school-children at Holiya VDC in Banke face the risk of displacement due to bank erosion by Rapti River.

In many districts, the DDRC, NRCS, UN agencies, I/NGOs and other relief organizations are continuing to cooperate under the cluster approach for flood and landslide preparedness. Organisations working within affected districts are requested to contact the district DP-Net focal point for further information on participation in preparedness activities.

Food security

A recently released, preliminary study by WFP and the National Development Research Institute (NDRI) warned that there is a clear risk that rising food prices become a significant challenge for the new government and if not dealt with effectively and in a timely manner, could undermine the peace process. Due to the already existing nutrition emergency, with half of all children stunted because of the chronic lack of food and 40 percent of people undernourished, the increase in food and fuel prices has made an already precarious situation worse.

The study said that 2.5 million people in rural Nepal need emergency food aid, 3.9 million people also need help if food prices increase further. Food price increases mean poor families can buy less and less food on the market to supplement their needs, putting their health at risk.

WFP operations have also been heavily hit by the rising cost of food and fuel. WFP estimates that the fuel price hike could translate into a 50% increase in costs over its 2008 projections, severely constraining its current operations which support two million people in Nepal. Strikes and fuel shortages have severely limited WFP's ability to transport food by land and air to those people who need it most.

Even though national food production levels are on the rise, eight districts (in particular Jajarkot, Bajura and Dailekh) have been hit with winter crop failures of up to 70%. WFP's existing operations are already providing food assistance to over 240,000 people impacted by drought in the Mid- and Far-West. WFP along with the Ministry of Agriculture is currently conducting a joint assessment in the affected communities in

order to identify people that may be outside of WFP food assistance programmes.

Health

Dysentery has reportedly affected more than 2,000 people in Khandbari and adjoining villages in Shankhuwasabha district, where the local population has no alternative to consuming polluted water. The disease has also spread to Bana, Shyaboon, Dhupu and Matshyapokhari VDCs.

With the onset of the wet season, one person of Laxmipur VDC in Kanchanpur died and 15 patients were admitted to Seti Zonal Hospital for treatment as a result of Japanese Encephalitis, an infectious disease spread by mosquitoes. Several people from Parasan in Kanchanpur and Urme of Kailali are also being treated for encephalitis.

Due to obstructions and breakdowns in the garbage removal system in Kathmandu Valley, Kathmandu's streets were littered with garbage for over a week which led government doctors to warn of outbreaks of various diseases among residents of the capital. Decayed garbage could contaminate drinking water sources, which would cause the spread of diseases, including cholera, jaundice, diarrhea, hepatitis, among other water-borne diseases.

Education

Over 63% of students who sat for this year's regular School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examination have passed (112,975 boys and 82,714 girls). Altogether 379,377 students had sat for this year's SLC exam conducted on 17 March. A supplementary examination will be held on 7 August.

Meanwhile the country's schools and colleges were again affected by a series of protests and obstructions due to exam repetitions, textbook shortages, transport fare discounts and similar concerns. Most often, road blocks were observed along the highway in Central and Eastern Terai by students demanding their text books. In some cases District Education Offices had to close due to students' protests. In one district, the principals of six private engineering colleges were held captive by students for 3 days demanding that the private colleges fix exam fees on a par with that of government colleges, but were released after students realised that principals have no authority to adjust exam fees.

COORDINATION

On 18 June, a contact group meeting dedicated to the issue of food security and humanitarian pandemic preparedness was held in Kathmandu.

UPCOMING EVENTS

- Eastern Region contact group meeting, OCHA Biratnagar, 26 June at 1300 (contact: Yadav K.C., OCHA)
- Donors meeting, 4 July
- IASC meeting (tent.), 17 July

Disclaimer: The information in this report is consolidated from media, UN, NGO, and other humanitarian partners, subject to availability of data. Although OCHA aims to confirm reports independently, occasional factual inaccuracies can occur. For inputs, questions or comments please contact: Marcus Brand, Humanitarian Affairs Analyst on ph. 98418 29420, brand1@un.org

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