

Refugee Review Tribunal

AUSTRALIA

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

Research Response Number: NPL17207
Country: Nepal
Date: 7 March 2005

Keywords: Nepal – Christians – King Gyanendra – 2005 State of Emergency – Imputed political opinion – Evangelical churches – Maoists

This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

Question

What is the potential, in light of the post-31 January 2005 crackdown on human rights demonstrations and reporting, for the forces of the king to view members of foreign-based evangelical churches with suspicion along lines of IMPUTED POLITICAL OPINION? The question is about the king (in addition to the Maoists) viewing membership of foreign-based churches as a politically-sensitive issue rather than simply one of religion or conscience. It is understood that it may be too early to expect there to be much "evidence" of such a reaction.

RESPONSE

What is the potential, in light of the post-31 January 2005 crackdown on human rights demonstrations and reporting, for the forces of the king to view members of foreign-based evangelical churches with suspicion along lines of IMPUTED POLITICAL OPINION? The question is about the king (in addition to the Maoists) viewing membership of foreign-based churches as a politically-sensitive issue rather than simply one of religion or conscience. It is understood that it may be too early to expect there to be much "evidence" of such a reaction.

Little information was found in the sources consulted on whether, or not, foreign-based churches will be adversely affected by the recent suspension of basic freedoms, including of press freedoms, in Nepal. Christian sources have admitted that the situation is “unclear”, while noting at the same time that the “monarchy has a poor history of allowing Christian activities” (‘Nepal’s persecuted Christians wary as new King takes power’ 2005, John Mark Ministers website, sourced from BosNewsLife, 2 February <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/14368.htm> – Accessed 1 March 2005 – Attachment 1).

Christian sources also indicate that some Christian missions in Nepal have expressed concern that the suspension of basic freedoms by the King may affect religious freedoms, including “church services, distribution of Gospel literature and other missionary activities” (‘Concern Mounts Over Potential Rights Abuses in Nepal’ 2005, The Christian Post online edition, 16 February

<http://www.christianpost.com/article/missions/1400/section/concern.mounts.over.potential.rights.abuses.in.nepal/1.htm> - Accessed 18 February 2005 – Attachment 2; ‘Nepal Christians Ask For Prayer’ 2005, Baptist World Alliance website, January-March <http://www.bwanet.org/News/05-jan-mar/nepalchristiansaskprayer.htm> - Accessed 2 March 2005 – Attachment 3).

Another Christian source warned that correspondence with mission personnel inside Nepal “may be censored” (‘Baptist Missionaries Trapped in Silent Nepal amid Government Crisis’ 2005, Christian Today website, 11 February

<http://www.christiantoday.com/news/miss/251.htm> - Accessed 2 March 2005 – Attachment 4).

Warnings such as these are to be considered alongside reports that the new administration has tightened media censorship in Nepal following on from the King’s initial clampdown on press freedoms; these banned “any criticism of the Royal Proclamation or the King’s actions” or “[a]ny reports that would give publicity to the Maoists”. On 2 March 2005, news reports indicated that Nepal’s information ministry issued a new notice extending the earlier ban to “independent media coverage of the country’s Maoist insurgency”. The new ban states that “news about the Maoist guerillas cannot be reported unless it comes from the security forces” (Haviland, C. 2005, ‘Nepal curbs reporting on rebels’, *BBC News* online, 2 March

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4313291.stm - Accessed 3 March 2005 – Attachment 5; ‘IFJ mission Releases Preliminary Findings on Media Conditions in Nepal’ 2005, International Federation of Journalists website, 2 March

<http://www.ifj.org/default.asp?Index=2962&Language=EN> – Accessed 3 March 2005 – Attachment 6; Levett, C. 2005, ‘Royal seal leaves little news for Nepalese media’, *Sydney Morning Herald* online edition, 4 March <http://www.smh.com.au/news/World/Royal-seal-leaves-little-news-for-Nepalese-media/2005/03/03/1109700612590.html> - Accessed 4 March 2005 – Attachment 7).

The current web content of evangelical church websites from Nepal, including those of the United Mission to Nepal (UMN) (<http://www.umn.org.np/news.htm>) and the International Nepal Fellowship (INF) (<http://www.inf.org.np/>) — the two most important evangelical groups in Nepal — suggest that they have been affected by the King’s crackdown on press freedoms since 1 February 2005. As viewed on 1 March 2005, the news content of both websites provide little – or no information in the case of the UMN – about the royal takeover or the ensuing human rights situation.

Recent media articles also state that the royal government is “no stranger to the tools of the internet”, indicating that it had blocked a number of non-Maoist news websites since the royal takeover. The articles report on how journalists in Nepal have turned to anonymous online blogs (or web logs)—such as Radio Free Nepal (<http://freenepal.blogspot.com/>) and United We Blog! (<http://www.blog.com.np/>)—to get around the King’s imposition of media restrictions (Besant, A. 2005, ‘Blogs rise above the Nepal information coup’, Asia Media website, 1 March <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=21285> – Accessed 2

March 2005 – Attachment 8; ‘Journalists slip information out of Nepal’ 2005, International Journalists’ Network website, 22 February http://www.ijnet.org/FE_Article/newsarticle.asp?UILang=1&Cid=294627&CidLang=1 – Accessed 2 March 2005 – Attachment 9; Murthy, L 2005, ‘Of coups and censorship’, The Independent Internet Edition, 2 March <http://independent-bangladesh.com/news/mar/02/02032005ed.htm> - Accessed 2 March 2005 – Attachment 10).

In a related article, dated 27 February 2005, Alpana Sawai notes it is “easy for the [Nepalese] government” to monitor web content as there are only “25 internet service providers in Nepal” (Sawai, A. 2005, ‘Nepalese journos start blogs’, Mid Day website, 27 February <http://www1.mid-day.com/news/nation/2005/february/104542.htm> - Accessed 2 March 2005 – Attachment 11).

It is relevant to note that foreign-based Christian groups operate, and are necessarily registered with the government, in Nepal as International Non Government Organisations; they “cannot be registered with the government” as churches (Regional Centre for Strategic Studies Undated, *New Evangelical Movements and Conflicts in South Asia – Sri Lanka and Nepal in Perspective*, Regional Centre for Strategic Studies website http://www.rcss.org/policy_studies/ps_5.html - Accessed 18 February 2005 – Attachment 12; ‘Social Welfare Council: Information on INGOs Working in Nepal’ 2060 Vikram, National Planning Commission, Government of Nepal website www.npc.gov.np/events/event_files/INGOs_Information.doc - Accessed 4 March 2005 – Attachment 13; Christian Solidarity Network 2004, CSW Country Profile: Nepal, October <http://www.csw.org.uk/Resources/Profiles/images/Nepal.pdf> - Accessed 3 March 2005 – Attachment 14). This fact must be taken into consideration when assessing the overall “potential...for the forces of the king to view members of such churches with suspicion along lines of imputed political opinion”. For as the sources indicate, the NGO community has been targeted by these forces since the royal takeover. Instances include: a much publicised arrest of an NGO activist; five alleged military raids of NGO offices in the western city of Nepalgunj; and reports that the army has “told all non-government organisations to re-apply for approval to operate” (‘Court orders release of rights activist’ 2005, Nepal News.Com website, 28 February <http://www.nepalnews.com.np/archive/2005/feb/feb28/news10.php> – Accessed 2 March 2005 – Attachment 15; ‘Noose tightens around Nepal’s pro-democracy activists’ 2005, Yahoo News online, Sources from *Agence France Presse*, 10 February <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/050210/1/3qh3v.html> - Accessed 2 March 2005 – Attachment 16; Levett, C. 2005, ‘Nepali army fires on protesters’, *The Age* online edition, 5 February <http://www.theage.com.au/text/articles/2005/02/04/1107476799554.html> - Accessed 2 March 2005 – Attachment 17).

Furthermore, organisations like the Asian Centre for Human Rights have recently warned commentators against disclosing local NGO sources of information coming from Nepal “under the present circumstances” (‘Footnotes, quotes and acknowledgements in a State of emergency’ 2005, *Asian Centre for Human Rights Review*, Volume 61, 23 February – Attachment 18).

Credible reports indicate that authorities in Nepal had already “place[d] curbs on international non-government organizations” before the royal takeover. A report dating back to December 2003 indicates, for instance, that NGOs were denied official clearance and that their members

were forced to work in Nepal under tourist visas. Also, that the Home Ministry had issued “a directive to...chief district officers to strictly regulate NGOs working in and outside district headquarters across the country”. This report states that the government’s clampdown was a product of its belief that Maoists were “receiving support from foreigners” (Pudell, K. 2003, ‘Nepal Curbs on NGOs Leave Medicare Gash Wide Open’, Global Policy Forum website, sourced from Oneworld United States website, 17 December <http://www.globalpolicy.org/ngos/aid/2003/1217gaash.htm> - Accessed 3 March 2005 – Attachment 19).

At the same time, other reports note that Maoist rebels have warned locals against working for international NGOs, such as Save the Children. In one report, a Maoist rebel leader accused American NGOs, such as USAid, of “spreading Christianity” under the guise of “development assistance” (Dhakal, S. 2003, ‘Nepal Rebels Turn the Heat on US NGOs’, One World South Asia website, 11 August <http://southasia.oneworld.net/article/view/65304/1> - Accessed 3 March 2005 – Attachment 20; Poudel, K. 2004, ‘Nepal Maoist Threats Prompt NGOs to Retreat’, One World South Asia website, 6 April <http://southasia.oneworld.net/article/view/83152/1/6> - Accessed 3 March 2005 – Attachment 21).

The sources consulted which follow below broadly indicate that suspect political opinions might be imputed to people in Nepal because they are members of one or another NGO or foreign-based evangelical church.

- A report by the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies notes, for instance, that many Nepalese nationalists “believe that the essential Hinduness of their kingdom is being threatened by non Hindu external influences, by which most of them refer to Christianity”. Elsewhere, the report observes that “anti-evangelical politics in Nepal is gaining a certain momentum in national politics” (Regional Centre for Strategic Studies Undated, *New Evangelical Movements and Conflicts in South Asia – Sri Lanka and Nepal in Perspective*, Regional Centre for Strategic Studies website http://www.rcss.org/policy_studies/ps_5.html - Accessed 18 February 2005 – Attachment 12). The decision of the Nepalese government to terminate an agreement with the United Mission to Nepal—on the grounds that the “international non-government organization was involved in spreading Christianity”—appears to have been the most recent manifestation of this trend (‘Nepal to consider renewing licence of Christian mission’ 2005, *BBC Monitoring*, sourced from *Rajdhani*, 5 January – Attachment 22).
- Reports from Christian sources also indicate that Maoist rebels accuse evangelists of being spies (‘Nepal: Evangelists viewed as spies’ 2002, Help For You website, 5 November <http://www.help-for-you.com/persecution/persTue05Nov2002.html> - Accessed 3 March 2005 – Attachment 23; Vyssotskaia, A. 2004, ‘Nepal: Maoist Rebel Activity Impacts Christian Ministry’, Caleb Project website, 2 December http://www.calebproject.org/main.php/missions_catalyst_e-magazine/nepal:_maoist_rebel_activity_impacts_christian_ministry – Accessed 3 March 2005 – Attachment 24).

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources:

Google search engine

UNHCR	<i>REFWORLD</i>	UNHCR Refugee Information Online
Databases:		
Public	<i>FACTIVA</i>	Reuters Business Briefing
DIMIA	<i>BACIS</i>	Country Information
	<i>REFINFO</i>	IRBDC Research Responses (Canada)
RRT	<i>ISYS</i>	RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State <i>Country Reports on Human Rights Practices</i> .
RRT Library	<i>FIRST</i>	RRT Library Catalogue

List of Attachments

1. 'Nepal's persecuted Christians wary as new King takes power' 2005, John Mark Ministries website, sourced from BosNewsLife, 2 February.
(<http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/14368.htm> – Accessed 1 March 2005)
2. 'Concern Mounts Over Potential Rights Abuses in Nepal' 2005, The Christian Post online edition, 16 February.
(<http://www.christianpost.com/article/missions/1400/section/concern.mounts.over.potential.rights.abuses.in.nepal/1.htm> - Accessed 18 February 2005)
3. 'Nepal Christians Ask For Prayer' 2005, Baptist World Alliance website, January-March. (<http://www.bwanet.org/News/05-jan-mar/nepalchristiansaskprayer.htm> - Accessed 2 March 2005)
4. 'Baptist Missionaries Trapped in Silent Nepal amid Government Crisis' 2005, Christian Today website, 11 February.
(<http://www.christiantoday.com/news/miss/251.htm> - Accessed 2 March 2005)
5. Haviland, C. 2005, 'Nepal curbs reporting on rebels', *BBC News* online, 2 March.
(http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4313291.stm - Accessed 3 March 2005)
6. 'IFJ mission Releases Preliminary Findings on Media Conditions in Nepal' 2005, International Federation of Journalists website, 2 March.
(<http://www.ifj.org/default.asp?Index=2962&Language=EN> – Accessed 3 March 2005)
7. Levett, C. 2005, 'Royal seal leaves little news for Nepalese media', *Sydney Morning Herald* online edition, 4 March. (<http://www.smh.com.au/news/World/Royal-seal-leaves-little-news-for-Nepalese-media/2005/03/03/1109700612590.html> - Accessed 4 March 2005)
8. Besant, A. 2005, 'Blogs rise above the Nepal information coup', Asia Media website, 1 March. (<http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=21285> – Accessed 2 March 2005)
9. 'Journalists slip information out of Nepal' 2005, International Journalists' Network website, 22 February.

(http://www.ijnet.org/FE_Article/newsarticle.asp?UILang=1&CId=294627&CIdLang=1 – Accessed 2 March 2005)

10. Murthy, L 2005, 'Of coups and censorship', The Independent Internet Edition, 2 March. (<http://independent-bangladesh.com/news/mar/02/02032005ed.htm> - Accessed 2 March 2005)
11. Sawai, A. 2005, 'Nepalese journos start blogs', Mid Day website, 27 February. (<http://www1.mid-day.com/news/nation/2005/february/104542.htm> - Accessed 2 March 2005)
12. Regional Centre for Strategic Studies Undated, New Evangelical Movements and Conflicts in South Asia – Sri Lanka and Nepal in Perspective, Regional Centre for Strategic Studies website. (http://www.rcss.org/policy_studies/ps_5.html - Accessed 18 February 2005)
13. 'Social Welfare Council: Information on INGOs Working in Nepal' 2060 Vikram, National Planning Commission, Government of Nepal website. (www.npc.gov.np/events/event_files/INGOs_Information.doc - Accessed 4 March 2005)
14. 'Christian Solidarity Network 2004, CSW Country Profile: Nepal, October. (<http://www.csw.org.uk/Resources/Profiles/images/Nepal.pdf> - Accessed 3 March 2005)
15. 'Court orders release of rights activist' 2005, Nepal News.Com website, 28 February. (<http://www.nepalnews.com.np/archive/2005/feb/feb28/news10.php> – Accessed 2 March 2005)
16. 'Noose tightens around Nepal's pro-democracy activists' 2005, Yahoo News online, Sources from *Agence France Presse*, 10 February. (<http://sg.news.yahoo.com/050210/1/3qh3v.html> - Accessed 2 March 2005)
17. Levett, C. 2005, 'Nepali army fires on protesters', *The Age* online edition, 5 February. (<http://www.theage.com.au/text/articles/2005/02/04/1107476799554.html> - Accessed 2 March 2005)
18. 'Footnotes, quotes and acknowledgements in a State of emergency' 2005, *Asian Centre for Human Rights Review*, Volume 61, 23 February.
19. Pudel, K. 2003, 'Nepal Curbs on NGOs Leave Medicare Gash Wide Open', Global Policy Forum website, sourced from Oneworld United States website, 17 December. (<http://www.globalpolicy.org/ngos/aid/2003/1217gaash.htm> - Accessed 3 March 2005)
20. Dhakal, S. 2003, 'Nepal Rebels Turn the Heat on US NGOs', One World South Asia website, 11 August. (<http://southasia.oneworld.net/article/view/65304/1> - Accessed 3 March 2005)
21. Poudel, K. 2004, 'Nepal Maoist Threats Prompt NGOs to Retreat', One World South Asia website, 6 April. (<http://southasia.oneworld.net/article/view/83152/1/6> - Accessed 3 March 2005)

22. 'Nepal to consider renewing licence of Christian mission' 2005, *BBC Monitoring*, sourced from *Rajdhani*, 5 January. (FACTIVA)
23. 'Nepal: Evangelists viewed as spies' 2002, Help For You website, 5 November. (<http://www.help-for-you.com/persecution/persTue05Nov2002.html> - Accessed 3 March 2005)
24. Vyssotskaia, A. 2004, 'Nepal: Maoist Rebel Activity Impacts Christian Ministry', Caleb Project website, 2 December. (http://www.calebproject.org/main.php/missions_catalyst_e-magazine/nepal: maoist rebel activity impacts christian ministry – Accessed 3 March 2005)