OCHA Nepal - Fortnightly Situation Overview

Issue No. 28, covering the period 29 May – 10 June 2008 Kathmandu, 11 June 2008

Highlights:

- Food crisis worsens in drought affected areas, while overall price increases affect Nepal's poor
- Fuel prices increased by up to 27 percent; transporters increase prices by up to 40 percent
- Formation of new government makes slow progress; election of a President stalls
- Operational space remains affected by security concerns, fuel shortages
- Resettlement of Bhutanese refugees continues, while tensions remain
- Flood preparations under way in most Terai districts as monsoon season is imminent

CONTEXT

Political situation

Following the declaration of the republic on 28 May, the Constituent Assembly (CA) decided on provisions for the post of President, as the new head of state, and a Vice-President. The CA held its first meeting without the 26 members that are yet to be appointed by the Council of Ministers. The deposed king agreed on 1 June to peacefully leave the royal palace and live as a common citizen, while the Government has decided to treat him as a former head of state. He was expected to leave the Narayanhiti Palace on 11 June.

The formation of a new government and the agreement on the rules for electing a president remained a matter of much contention between the political parties. After a series of fruitless consultations, mutual recriminations and public threats, on 9 June, the three leading parties Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN/M), Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) (CPN-UML) formed a joint panel to end the political deadlock.

After initially claiming that it should get both the presidential and the prime ministerial posts in the new government, CPN/M has offered to find a non-partisan, independent candidate for the post of President. In another concession to earlier statements, they have also offered to remove the two-thirds majority provision to allow forming and ousting a government with simple majority if the major parties agree on common minimum program, and to allow them to govern for the interim period of two years while the constitution is being drafted. However, at the time of writing all talks were inconclusive and the parties' positions are subject to change.

The panel of the three major parties also agreed to scrap the constitutional provisions on the Seven Party Alliance, but could not agree on modalities for the integration of Maoist combatants and relief to conflict victims.

Due to the disputes over power-sharing and the election of a president the second sitting of the CA, scheduled for 5 June, was adjourned to 11 June.

After receiving much criticism by other parties and the wider public for continued political violence, on 31 May the President of the Young Communist League (YCL) Ganesh Man Pun announced that his organization would cease "to handle cases and complaints filed by the public", but that the YCL would support the police instead. In one of the few clashes among political supporters in recent days, at least 20 persons were injured when Maoist and UML cadres and members of a local cooperative in Ramechhap clashed on 6 June over the election of the Board of Directors of a Saving and Credit Cooperative.

The Tharu Kalyankari Sabha (TKS) on 29 May announced a series of protest programs against what it said was the provision in the Interim Constitution regarding 'Tharuhat Terai' as 'one Madhesh' region in an attempt to pressure the CA not to approve the Madheshi People's Rights Forum (MPRF's) demand of 'One Madhesh-One Province'. If the CA fails to address the Tharu community's demand, the TKS would launch another movement in Terai.

The Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) has threatened to launch protests to secure the rights of marginalized groups, and has expressed its disapproval of the Government's delay in nominating the 26 remaining CA members from among marginalized and indigenous people.

Carrying food from Taplejung to Olangchunggola can take up to five days. Photo: OCHA

Safety and Security

The security situation has been affected by a series of bandhs and protests, explosions in Kathmandu and the Terai, continued violence perpetrated by armed groups and an increase in violent crime. Three persons were killed by police in a clash in Dhangadi following a dispute involving Maoist reprisals against journalists.

On 4 June, Nepal Police deployed 6,000 more police personnel in Kathmandu after eight bombing incidents in the capital during the past seven days. A Hindu fundamentalist group Ranabir Sena has claimed responsibility in most cases. On 28 May, three small IEDs exploded in Kathmandu including two near the seat of the CA and another in Tundhikhel. One person was slightly injured. On 30 May, an IED detonated near a Maoist mass meet at Ratnapark.

In the Terai, an increase of criminal activities involving Terai armed groups was observed over the reporting period. Birgunj of Parsa continued to be one of the hotspots, where the business community is being targeted. On 27 May, an IED was detonated at the house of CA candidate of Bara. On 29 May, a group of armed assailants shot the chairman of the Birgunj retailers' association. On 30 May, an employee of Nepal Electricity Authority was killed by activists of Akhil Terai Mukti Morcha (ATMM). On 29 May, cadres of Madheshi Liberation Tigers (MLT) shot dead one of their own at Piparadi of Bara. In nearby Kalaiya, on 31 May cadres of the People's Liberation Revolutionary Group (PLRG) shot dead one of its own. Meanwhile, a socket bomb detonated at the house of an active NC member, causing slight damage.

Businessmen, civil servants and commoners of Birgunj shut the bazaar and took to the streets on 31 May, demanding security in the district in a wake of killings and attacks on businessmen, civil servants and commoners. On 2 June, the Nepal Bar Association (NBA) staged demonstrations in Birgunj to protest the murder of a legal practitioner of Bara in late May. However, the protests were of little avail. On 5 June, Samyukta Janatantrik Mukti Morcha (JTMM) shot and seriously injured another businessman in Birgunj, "for not helping the Madhes movement", as its commander said in a statement.

Bombings, killings and abductions also were reported in other areas. On 27 May, an unidentified group killed a person in Mahottari district. On 29 May, an unidentified armed group shot dead a Sarlahi businessman in Rupandehi District. On the same day another businessman was shot dead at Chipagadh of Sarlahi. On 31 May, cadres of Terai Army detonated a bomb at a busy marketplace of Barahathawa of Sarlahi, damaging a shop but causing no human casualties. On 1 June, six persons were injured by fragments of a pipe bomb set off by a group of robbers in Chatre of Siraha district. Also on 1 June an employee at Janakpur Cigarette Factory was assassinated by an unidentified armed gang while sleeping in his house at Basbitti, Dhanusha. Before this, six staffers of the factory have already been shot and two of them have died in recent weeks. On 4 June, unidentified groups detonated four bombs at various places in Nawalparasi including Ramgram Municipality, the district headquarters. Police said the blasts caused no damage. On 5 June, an employee of Chitwan Cement Factory, who served as chairman of the Worker's Union there, was shot and killed at Tilakpur of Nawalparasi by an unidentified gang. On 6 June, cadres of Jwala Singh-led JTMM detonated a bomb at a car dealer in Bhujui near Nepalgunj on charge of "not providing them a donation".

In Dhangadi, Kailali, a journalist was severely beaten by CPN/M cadres on 27 May for publishing a story criticizing it. CPN-M cadres also attacked local villagers who came to the aid of the journalist and one person was seriously injured. Following the assault, on 28 May several journalists and the district president of the Federation of Nepalese Journalists (FNJ) met with authorities at the District Administration Office (DAO). During the meeting, a violent demonstration took place in front of the DAO and the Nepal Police (NP) fired into the crowd, leaving three dead and at least seven wounded. On 30 May the DAO declared a 3-day curfew to curb the rioting.

Bandhs (strikes) affected a number of localities for brief periods. A Bardiya district bandh called by businessmen to protest the seizure of diesel imported from India closed markets during the first week of June. On 4 June, a general strike in Saptari was called by various Dalit organizations to press for better representation in the CA. The strike called by groups such as Khatwai Samaj, Mehatar, Dome and Mushar forced market places to shut in the district. On 10 June, transport entrepreneurs shut down most activity in Nepalgunj, Banke, and Biratnagar, Morang, where Madheshi rickshaw pullers, students and construction workers also held simultaneous strikes. A two-day bandh called by the ATMM in Bara and Parsa districts affected normal life in those districts, as all markets, educational institutions, industries and transport services remained closed.

Conflict related IEDs also continue to affect the security situation in some areas. On 3 June, five people including two children were injured in Sungurkhal of Kailali when a number of IEDs left by Maoist PLA members detonated in an abandoned house.

Reach of the State

In addition to criminal incidents a number of groups also targeted state institutions directly, thereby further weakening the presence of state representatives in some areas. On 31 May, the Kirat Janabadi Workers Party (KJWP) detonated a bomb at the Beltar VDC office building and near the base camp of the Armed Police Force (APF) in Udayapur. KJWP threatened physical action against all VDC employees if they did not give up the job. The VDC employees are said to have left to the district headquarters for security reasons. On 8 June KJWP activists destroyed the office including all official documents of Wadka Diyale VDC of Khotang and threatened VDC employees to resign from their posts within fifteen days.

At least a dozen people were injured in a blast at the Land Reform office in Malangawa of Sarlahi on 1 June. Reports said unidentified persons on bicycles detonated a LG gas cylinder stuffed with explosives. Two of the injured persons are in critical condition. The Terai Army has claimed responsibility. On 3 June, an unidentified gang detonated an IED at the Traffic Police Office of Jaleshwor, Mahottari. On 5 June an unidentified gang shot dead a land survey official of Bateshwor in Dhanusha; on 6 June Janamukti Krantikari Morcha (JKM) detonated a bomb in Prasouni of Bara targeting a police van.

Across the country, the presence of VDC secretaries and other state officials is still low, which prevents state development funds to be disbursed in a number of areas. Meanwhile, with the fiscal year nearing its end, political parties are said to have divided the Sarlahi's District Development Council's unspent money among themselves in order to implement projects on their own, according to media reports.

In the past month several Chief District Officers (CDOs) were also reported absent from the districts.

Operational Space and Humanitarian Access

On 30 May, ambulance operators from Sunsari and Morang agreed to put an end to the misuse of ambulances and attacks on emergency service vehicles at a roundtable convened by the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) and the Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS).

Reports from the Central Terai indicate that NGOs with locally hired staffs are working without major hindrances while staffs hired from outside face problems when they have to stay over night in a village due to security threats. The operational space tends to be contingent on the negotiation capabilities of staff, and the transparency of I/NGOs working in the area.

All agencies are requested to consult with UNHCR and IOM before undertaking travel to the refugee camps in Jhapa and Morang.

Due to increasing shortage of petroleum products across the country, staff members of UN agencies have been advised to ensure that they have reserve stocks and to minimize vehicular movement.

HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

Protection

OHCHR-Nepal has expressed concerns over the killings by Nepal Police (NP) of three individuals, and the wounding of at least seven others, at the District Administration Office (DAO) in Dhangadi on 28 May. According to international standards, law enforcement officials may only use firearms in dispersing a violent assembly to protect themselves or others against an imminent threat of death or serious injury and only when less extreme means are insufficient to achieve this objective.

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has instructed the government to immediately implement its recommendations regarding action on cases of human rights violations. The NHRC said the government has implemented only 38 of the 187 recommendations it has made so far.

Refugees and IDPs

The situation around the Bhutanese refugee camps has remained tense following two attacks on International Organization for Migration (IOM) transports and growing resentment among some refugee groups at the continued absence of a perspective to return to Bhutan. On 2 June refugees staged demonstrations in their camps demanding repatriation at the call of a Street Struggle Committee, a newly-formed body of refugees. Refugees formed rallies inside the camps after the APF prevented them from coming out. Meanwhile, security has been tightened in the camps. Entrance of private vehicles in the refugee camps has been banned.

The governments of Australia, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and the United States, as members of the Core Working Group on Bhutanese Refugees in Nepal, noted their deep concern about attacks and escalating threats against Bhutanese refugees seeking third country resettlement and the humanitarian workers who assist them. In a joint statement issued 6 June, they referred to statements from the IOM, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the World Food Programme (WFP) who noted in their May 22 statement that attacks against refugees and humanitarian staff endanger continued provision of aid to refugees in Nepal.

The Core Group also noted that many refugees continue to seek resettlement, while recognizing that "resettlement to another country is not the first choice of most refugees, whose strongest desire is to go home". Stating that "third country resettlement should not bar refugees from returning to Bhutan in the future" the Group added that it would continue to urge the government of Bhutan to accept the repatriation of its citizens.

Tibetan refugees in Kathmandu have resumed their protests at the Chinese Embassy following a pause in the wake of the Sichuan earthquake. On several consecutive days during the first week of June Nepali police detained pro-Tibet protesters after a lull of several weeks. On 5 June, authorities temporarily detained at least 250 Tibetan exiles in front of a Chinese embassy building.

Food security

WFP has issued an Emergency Update (No.4) with an immediate alert for rapidly deteriorating food security conditions in the Far and Mid-west Hills and Mountains. The Ministry of Agriculture jointly with WFP is planning a rapid assessment mission to further assess the situation and determine required action. The food security situation for many communities living in the Mid- and Far-West is very worrying.

More than 300,000 people in Achham, Bajura, Dailekh, Dolpa, Humla, Jajarkot, Kalikot, Mugu and Rukum are facing a precarious food situation due to significant localized crop failures of between 20-70%. For many of the affected, this is the fifth consecutive season of significantly poor crop yields, leaving many with few coping mechanisms as they enter the traditional three-month lean period. The high cost of food items could quickly plunge affected families into severe food insecurity as their cash resources will be too small to purchase the food they need. Through its existing programmes, WFP is providing food to many of the affected families in these areas.

On 30 May, the Nepal Food Corporation (NFC) began supplying some quantities of rice to remote hilly districts in the Mid-Western Region to help curb any food shortage. Food shortages affect the hilly districts usually from mid-June onwards; however five years of successive drought, the affects of conflict and other climate-related problems have left people in this area in a more precarious state. NFC rice consignments were dispatched by air to Jumla, Humla, Dolpa and Mugu districts and will be supplied to Jajarkot, Dailekh, Kalikot and Rolpa through road transport. Although NFC rice is sold at subsidized rates, these food prices may still be out of reach for many poor families and the rice quantities are generally insufficient to meet demand.

After the Nepal Oil Corporation (NOC), whose monthly losses have exceeded Rs 2.7 billion, warned that the petroleum supply crisis would worsen and that the supply stock could meet the demand of petrol, diesel and kerosene for only a few more days, on 8 June, the Government decided to raise the price of petroleum products, in order to bring those more in line with the international market. The new price for petrol as of 11 June will be Rs 100/litre, for diesel Rs 70/litre, kerosene Rs 65/litre and Rs 1200 for a cylinder of cooking gas. It also cut import duties on petroleum products and allowed the private sector to import and sell such products, thus ending the NOC's monopoly. Even with these changes, the NOC will continue to suffer significant losses, however. Transport entrepreneurs responded with a reported price hike of up to 40% and students reacted with sporadic protests near campuses.

Health

A number of Terai districts have reported cases of diarrhoea, encephalitis and typhoid in the past two weeks, often resulting from adverse weather conditions, poor water supply and hygiene.

One elderly man died on 31 May while more than 70 others fell sick due to a diarrhoea outbreak in Fulbariya of Siraha district affecting a whole village badly. The outbreak was apparently caused when a local boarding school cleaned its latrines and improperly disposed of the waste, thereby contaminating four drinking water wells. These were treated with bleaching powder by the health authorities who also provided oral rehydration to the villagers.

Media also reported about a typhoid epidemic in Ghukauli of Sarlahi district, which has hit more than 50 persons including

children as young as three years old. The District Public Health Office has been alerted.

Avian Influenza

The human health component of the Avian Influenza Control Project lays emphasis on increased surveillance and rapid containment. As a part of preparedness for pandemic influenza, the Ministry of Health and Population in co-operation with WHO organized a training workshop on outbreak investigation and rapid containment of pandemic influenza for 28 District Health Officers of Eastern Terai Districts (Ilam, Jhapa, Morang, Taplejung, Saptari, Panchthar, Sunsari and Siraha). Rapid containment and outbreak response modules for the district level are being prepared. No cases of H5N1 or HPAI in birds have been reported in Nepal to date.

Flood and disaster preparedness

In many Terai districts which are flood-prone during the monsoon season (July-September), District Disaster Relief Committees (DDRCs), as provided for in applicable legislation, have been taking place under the leadership of the responsible CDOs and with the support of DPNet, I/NGOs and their partners as well as OCHA.

District	1st	2nd	3rd	DP-Net Focal Point
	DDRC Disaster Preparedness Meeting			
	Far Western Region			
Kanchanpur	25/30 May	TBD	TBD	OCCED / ActionAid
Kailali	20 May	13 June	TBD	FAYA Nepal
	Mid Western Region			
Bardiya	4 June	TBD	TBD	Practical Action
Banke	26 May	18 June	TBD	Save the Children US
Dang	TBD	TBD	TBD	Save the Children US
	Central Region			
Bara	23 May	2nd w/June	TBD	ActionAid
Parsa	22 May	1st w/June	TBD	ActionAid
Rautahat	23 May	4 June	TBD	ActionAid, Oxfam
Sarlahi	3 June	15 June	TBD	ActionAid, Oxfam
Mahottari	26 May	10 June	TBD	Oxfam, Care
Dhanusha	27-28 May	20 June	TBD	ActionAid, Caritas
Makwanpur	4 June	TBD	TBD	ActionAid
Sindhuli	TBD	TBD	TBD	Oxfam, Caritas
	Eastern Region			
Siraha	1 June	10 June	TBD	ActionAid, Save the Children Alliance
Saptari	11 June	TBD	TBD	Oxfam
Sunsari	4 June	*11 June*	TBD	ActionAid, World Vision
Morang	11 June	TBD	TBD	Save the Children Alliance
Jhapa	26 May	TBD	TBD	LWF, Caritas

The major decisions thus agreed upon include: Systematic categorization of disaster prone VDCs; sector lead divisions (with contact details); stocking of food and non-food-items (NFI); and date fixation of second DDRC meetings for planning further preparedness of each selected sector.

On 4 June at 4:09 am, the National Seismological Center at the department of Mines and Geology, recorded an earthquake measuring 4.1 on the Richter scale with the epicentre at Listikot of Sindhupalchok district.

Education

The Ministry of Education and Sports has directed government and community schools to resume classes from 2 June, after having decided earlier to close them for two weeks till mid-June due to shortage of textbooks, which had drawn massive criticism from guardians, students and schools. The Ministry has stated that the availability of textbooks has improved in recent days, but media reports say that the crisis may last for several more weeks.

Meanwhile, occasional school related protests continued. On 2 June, parents encircled the Morang District Education Office (DEO) protesting against a fee hike in private schools. Also on 2 June, students locked up seven employees working for the Khotang DEO citing unavailability of textbooks. On 8 June, students staged a sit-in protest at the DEO of Dang and two were hurt in clashes in Birtamod of Jhapa between students and a bookstore owner.

The European Commission (EC) and the Government of Nepal have announced a Financing Agreement to start implementing an 'Education Sector Policy Support Program' with an initial amount of €25m (ca. US$ 38m) for the period of 2008-2010. In line with the EC-Nepal Framework Cooperation Agreement the education sector is expected to receive more than US$ 100m until 2013.

The Australian Government's International Aid Agency (AusAID) will provide Rs 799m to upgrade basic education and emergency preparedness. Of the total grant, Rs 650m is meant for the 'Education for All' programme. Rs 149m will be allocated to strengthen the peace process and emergency preparedness. The funds will be mobilized through Save the Children Alliance, UNDP, UNICEF, WFP and WHO.

COORDINATION

On 30 May, the Nepal Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), along with select donors, reviewed the strategic priorities, humanitarian needs and response plans for the remainder of 2008. Based on feedback from the humanitarian community, the mid-year review document of the CAP will be ready by mid-June for global dissemination.

UPCOMING EVENTS

- UNCT Pandemic Influenza Simulation, 11 June 2008
- Central Terai Contact Group, 12 June, Bagmati Welfare Society, Hariown, Sarlahi (contact: Leith Baker, OCHA)
- Kathmandu Contact Group Meeting, UN House, 18 June
- IASC Disaster Management Team meeting (tent.), 27 June

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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