

Madheshi people reject marginalisation in Nepal

Wednesday 21 February 2007, by [CHENG Eva](#) (Date first published: 8 February 2007).

Nepalese PM Girija Prasad Koirala has vowed to amend the country's constitution to meet the key demands of Madheshi protesters from the country's southern plains, BBC News reported on February 8. He pledged to introduce a federal system of governance and more representation of the southern plains in the parliament.

"Nepal's human rights commission says 27 people have died over three weeks of protests in the region", BBC News reported. "Madheshi groups say they have been discriminated against in the existing state structure."

Madheshi Janadhikar Forum (MJF) chairperson Upendra Yadav was reported to have welcomed Koirala's announcement as a "positive" move. Yadav said the MJF was suspending its protests for 10 days to create an atmosphere for talks with the government. But he said that before the talks could take place, home minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula had to resign and an inquiry be ordered into the killings in the Terai region.

The previous day, Nepalese police had opened fire on Madheshi protesters in Biratnagar, a town in the Terai region in southern Nepal. Two protesters were killed, bringing the death toll from the unrest in Terai in the previous three weeks to at least 20.

The MJF has been demanding a federal state and autonomy for the southern plains region and greater representation in the parliament. It argues that "ruling elites" dominated by people from the highland areas of Nepal have denied the Madheshis fair political representation, and restricted the number of jobs available to them in the police and army.

Madheshis make up 33-45% of Nepal's population of 27 million but are vastly under-represented in the civil service and the army, which tend to be dominated by hill-dwellers.

On February 7, in response to the crisis in Nepal, UN secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon appointed British human rights activist Ian Martin (Ban's representative in Nepal since last August) to head a newly established UN Mission in Nepal (UNMIN). The mission is to be staffed with 186 military personnel, for a 12-month period. The UN Security Council unanimously decided on January 23 to set up UNMIN.

One of UNMIN's tasks will be overseeing implementation of the peace agreement struck last June between the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the ruling Seven Party Alliance (SPA). The agreement includes the disarming of both the CPN(M)-led guerrilla forces and the Nepalese Army. The CPN(M) has been waging an anti-monarchist, anti-landlord guerrilla war since 1996.

UNMIN will also monitor elections scheduled for mid-June for a constituent assembly to write a new constitution.

After months of mass protests, King Gyanendra, who had established himself as an autocratic ruler through a coup four years earlier, was toppled from power last April.

While the Madheshi people include an indigenous component — the Janjathi, who are estimated to account for 28% of the Madheshi population — most of the Madheshis are recent migrants from northern India, and are culturally and linguistically much closer to its inhabitants than those of Nepal's hill region.

There are 92 languages spoken in Nepal, of which 11 are major ones. Nepali, a hill language and also the official language, is spoken by 49% of the population.

Encouraged by the ruling elite, the generally more privileged hill people have historically seen the Madheshis on the southern plains as "sub-Nepali", hence a target for systematic discrimination. For example, while the average population per electoral constituency in the hill districts is 73,000, it is 127,500 in the Terai districts.

According to a February 2006 study by Shree Gobvind Shah, Social Inclusion of Madheshi Community in Nation Building, while 90% of the Terai districts have a large number of educationally deprived communities, the same problem occurs in only 13% of the hill districts.

Many Madheshis are landless or homeless and are therefore denied of citizenship certificates. A lack of citizenship status deprives many of them of access to decent jobs, loans or the right to vote.

Involvement in the mass movement against Gyanendra's autocratic regime has given Madheshis the confidence to challenge their oppression.

A general strike was organised in the Terai region by the MJF on January 19, shutting down the supply of petrol and other fuels to the hills areas. Most of the hills area's fuel supplies are imported from India via the southern plains.

According to a February 5 South Asia Analysis Group comment piece, CPN(M) chairperson Prachanda blamed the unrest in Terai on the "conspiracy of the royalists who are inciting violence in the name of [the Madheshis], indigenous people and the [ethnic] nationalities". Prachanda also blamed the SPA for not adequately addressing the grievances of the Madheshis and the Janjathis.

The report also quoted CPN(M)'s number two leader, Baburam Bhattarai, as alleging that "truckloads" of Indians were being brought in to participate in the agitation in Terai.

Koirala, on the other hand, blamed the CPN(M) for triggering the unrest.

P.S.

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