



**Closing Statement at Nepalgunj Human Rights Community Interaction
on Discrimination and Social Exclusion**

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I have had the privilege today to meet with a wide range of civil society representatives in Nepalgunj, and to listen to your concerns about human rights. I have learned about a range of issues, but want to highlight the issue of longstanding discrimination and social exclusion, which affects the human rights of Nepalese people from many walks of life. We have talked about the challenge this poses for all of us, human rights defenders, community workers, communities, political parties, security forces and the Government.

Nepal has an historic opportunity, following the end of the eleven-year conflict and the human rights and social transformation commitments included in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, to take practical and measurable steps to begin to eradicate the longstanding discrimination which has resulted in the profound social exclusion of millions of its people.

Since my arrival in Nepal, including here today in Nepalgunj, I have heard about discrimination suffered by Dalit people, Madhesis, indigenous peoples, women and girls from many backgrounds, persons with disabilities, sexual minorities, and many other groups.

Discrimination takes many forms, affecting social, cultural and economic rights as well as civil and political rights: for example, access to water and food, to housing, to education and work opportunities, to citizenship and the protection and rights this affords, to justice and the protection of the law.

The recent events in Nepalgunj have highlighted the need to recognize and address issues of exclusion through dialogue and a greater understanding of these problems.

In Nepal, as in many other parts of the world, there is a direct link between discrimination and poverty for millions of people. Discrimination creates obstacles for people in securing access to opportunities and resources, and in Nepal this has meant that many development initiatives bypass some of the groups most affected by discrimination, and most in need of those opportunities and resources.

Discrimination and exclusion deny individuals and communities the simple human dignity that is the basis of equality and the fundamental foundation of all human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in its Preface, emphasises “the inherent dignity and ... the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family”. Article One states that “(a)ll human

beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". International human rights law is built upon this foundation.

The Government of Nepal has an obligation in international law to address these issues of deep-seated inequality and discrimination.

It is not an easy task to change long-standing and deeply rooted discrimination. It cannot be completed overnight. However, by acknowledging the problem in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the parties have opened the way to change. This commitment must be followed up with practical measures during the transition to ensure that those peoples who have been traditionally left out of the political process are able to participate equally in the shaping of the new Nepal, including by participating in the election to the Constituent Assembly.

The new Citizenship Act is an important start in addressing this cause of exclusion for millions of Nepalese people, though my Office remains concerned about discriminatory provisions related to women. It is also essential to ensure that decision-making bodies at all levels are more representative of the diversity of Nepalese society, and especially that they include membership from traditionally excluded groups such as Dalits, Madhesis and indigenous peoples. The exclusion of women from public and political life must also be addressed. It is essential that people who have been traditionally excluded have access to information about the political process, and opportunities to participate in it.

Nepal's commitment to human rights will be tested through this peace process. If the *Jana Aandalon* in April 2006 was a signal that the Nepalese people were demanding their rights, the peace process now must ensure that all Nepalese people are able fully to exercise and enjoy these rights. The constitution-making process must be one in which the principle of equality of all people becomes the basis for action to address and eradicate longstanding discrimination and social exclusion. This will require commitment, and action, by the Government, political parties and civil society, at the community level as well as at the national level.

On that note, I would like to close by congratulating your organizations for your work to protect and promote human rights here in Nepalgunj and the Mid-Western region – and to urge you to intensify your efforts towards eradicating discrimination and social exclusion in your communities and throughout the country.