

Statement By:
***UNICEF and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in
Nepal***

“Keep children free from harm”

Kathmandu, 22 February: The United Nations' Children Fund (UNICEF) and The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR-Nepal) are increasingly concerned at the threat of harm to children, given the violent protests that have been taking place in the country, particularly in the Terai.

There are alarming and confirmed reports of children participating in violent protests and *bandhs*. In Nepalgunj, for example, on 3 and 4 February, a considerable number of children aged between seven and fifteen years old, some of whom carried sticks, were observed supporting the enforcement of the *bandh*. In Duhabi, Sunsari District, a number of children between the ages of eight and twelve years were seen manning a roadblock armed with sticks. The crowd that attacked a group of Nepali Congress members in Darchula District on 5 February also reportedly included at least a hundred children and students, some in school uniforms. Children have been seen at several other locations during the Terai-wide *bandh* including the violent protests in Nepalgunj on 17 February, during which one person was shot dead and several injured by bullets, including a fourteen year-old boy.

UNICEF and OHCHR urge all parties to respect the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Nepal is a signatory, and to take all necessary measures to avoid exposing all boys and girls under the age of eighteen to risk of harm. People under eighteen must not be forced, coerced or bribed into participating in political activities. Any participation must be voluntary, with consideration given as to whether they fully understand the implications of their participation. Children should not be armed under any circumstances.

With the country preparing for Constituent Assembly elections, UNICEF and OHCHR would also like to remind all parties concerned to respect Section 23 of the Election Code of Conduct of 2007, which clearly states that no children should be brought to participate in any kind of procession, mass meeting or rally, or in any election-related publicity activity.

Furthermore, it is unacceptable that hundreds of thousands of children in the Terai and some Eastern hill districts have been prevented from attending school due to the imposition of *bandhs*. The indefinite closure of schools has forced girls and boys to stay at home and is depriving them of their fundamental right to education.

UNICEF and OHCHR urge all parties to ensure that children are not used through manipulation or coercion for political purposes, and that their right to education is respected. All schools should remain open during *bandhs* and the safety of children assured so that their education is not interrupted. Nepal's future development depends on the education of its younger generations.

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