



**Statement by Richard Bennett
Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Nepal
Delivered by OHCHR Spokesperson Marty Logan at the Program,
The Role and Responses of Media on Human Rights
16 March 2008, Kathmandu**

Mr Hem Raj Gywali of Kantipur FM and Kantipur Publications; Mr Bhaskar Raj Karnikar, Avenues Television; Ms. Montessori Raj Bhandari, Communication Corner; Mr Prasan Syangden, Rights of Individuals for Social Empowerment (RISE); Mr Sushil Pyakurel, Accountability Watch Committee; Mandira Sharma, Executive Director of Advocacy Forum; other distinguished panellists, members of the media, and friends:

Thank you for inviting me to be a part of your program here today. Coincidentally, OHCHR-Nepal is also organizing a workshop for journalists about human rights later this month. At this critical and somewhat turbulent time in the country's history it is important that the media be given the tools to report accurately on human rights issues, which should have a more prominent role in this post-conflict period. So, I would like to commend Advocacy Forum and RISE for organizing today's program.

I see that one focus of your workshop will be how to enhance the media's reporting on the issue of impunity. Impunity, or the lack of accountability for past and ongoing human rights violations, is one of four areas of focus of my Office for 2008 and beyond. OHCHR-Nepal has been advocating an end to the culture of impunity since it started working here in 2005, so if you allow me, I would like to make a few suggestions to the media in this regard.

First, there is more information available to the media about impunity for human rights violations than is usually included in its reporting. For example, most of OHCHR's reports – many of which discuss impunity in whole or in part – are at least 20 pages long, but generally journalists limit their own reporting to what is contained in our press releases (which are 1 or 2 pages in length).

I would like to encourage all journalists to take some time to scan our reports – and those of Advocacy Forum and other human rights organizations – in depth. Nestled deep inside them you will find the details and personal stories that could make compelling reports for your readers/viewers or listeners. By the way, all of OHCHR-Nepal's reports, and press releases, are available 24 hours a day on our website – <http://nepal.ohchr.org>. Speeches from the High Commissioner for Human Rights, information from the Human Rights Council and background material on human rights is at <http://ohchr.org>.

I know that there are barriers to reporting on human rights: it is not seen as the sexiest topic, certainly when it's compared to politics. Even for those journalists who take a personal interest and really pursue the human rights story, it is often daunting because the language is precise – sometimes very technical – and there are issues of privacy that often seem like unnecessary barriers to telling important stories.

Again, I would like to encourage all journalists to think of OHCHR-Nepal as an information provider. We want you to report on human rights, and we will take the time to explain the issues to you. Often we can't do it right away because the specialist in our Office who would be the ideal person for you to talk to is not immediately available; but we will make efforts to help you create a strong human rights story. Our media people can usually provide you with enough information to get a start on a story, but surprisingly, they get very few queries from journalists for help with their reporting, and they would welcome more.

Finally, a few words about impunity. I think that many journalists when they hear the word 'impunity' think that human rights organizations are talking only about killings, torture and disappearances, the best-known violations that were associated with the conflict. Impunity of course applies in that context – as we know, no one from either side has been held accountable for serious human rights violations committed during the conflict. However, in larger terms impunity refers to a situation where no one is held accountable for a wrongdoing that they are alleged to have committed. This applies to alleged perpetrators of rape, who are often not prosecuted because of a statute in Nepal's Civil Code that says a charge-sheet must be filed within 35 days, or not at all. Impunity also occurs when a police personnel uses excessive force during a political protest and is not held accountable for his actions.

The sad result of the lack of accountability is this 'culture of impunity' which we often hear used to describe Nepal's human rights environment. As we all know, changing a culture is a difficult, often slow process. At the same time you might have heard the saying – the only certain thing in this world is change; nothing remains the same. I like to think of the arrival of OHCHR in Nepal as one important step in ending the culture of impunity. The effort is ongoing, and in the past year has been more visible thanks to the efforts of many organizations, including Advocacy Forum, Amnesty International-Nepal, and COCAP, to name only a few.

The fight against impunity for human rights violations is gathering strength. Institutionalizing accountability for those who hold power will strengthen respect for the human rights of all Nepalis. I would encourage those journalists here today and others throughout the country to play a role in making that important development happen.

Thank you.