

Check against delivery



Remarks by Richard Bennett
Representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Nepal
Delivered at the launch of OHCHR's *Handbook for Civil Society* (in Nepali)
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Namaste

I am very happy to welcome you all at the first public event in Pokhara since OHCHR's Office closed here in June. As was stated during the closure of the Office in Pokhara, our Central Field Office in Kathmandu and Nepalgunj Field Office continue to work in this region, covering the hilly and Tarai districts respectively, in close partnership with civil society organizations and other partners including the NHRC. As many of you are aware a number of activities initiated by our Pokhara office are continuing, including the human rights campaign for social harmony in Kapilvastu.

The Office also remains actively engaged in supporting the work and development of civil society networks in the region, including the Women Human Rights Defenders network in Kaski and the Accountability Watch Committee in Kapilvastu. To maintain this engagement, we have also decided to launch the Nepali version of an OHCHR publication here in Pokhara today - "Working with the United Nations Human Rights Programme: a Handbook for Civil Society".

Thank you all for being here today to launch this handbook which I know will be very useful to civil society organizations in Nepal. Special thanks to INSEC which has helped to organise today's event. The handbook is a global publication published by OHCHR Geneva, and the English version was released in Kathmandu in June. This is a national launch of the handbook in Nepali and it may be the first time that the entire handbook has been published in a non official UN language. My colleague Andrew Palmer will provide an overview of the handbook shortly, but I just want to emphasise that this is a practical tool for NGOs to develop an understanding of international human rights mechanisms, how the mechanisms work, and how civil society can access and work with them. One of the chapters of the handbook highlights Funds and Grants available to civil society. Another is on the Universal Periodic Review which is of particular interest now given that Nepal will undergo the UPR process in early 2011 and as a result preparations for that process have begun and will continue throughout 2010. Civil Society's role in the UPR process will be crucial and OHCHR looks forward to working closely with our civil society partners in these efforts.

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OHCHR-Nepal is also looking forward to working closely with civil society organizations, including victim groups working at the grassroots level, in relation to a civil society grant fund, a component of the *Peace through Justice* project which is currently being implemented by my Office. The Peace through Justice Project grant fund provides funding to organizations to implement activities and project that contribute effectively to the transitional justice process in the country. Andrew will also provide some more information on this shortly, and leaflets will be distributed to each of you.

This fund is one way to ensure that civil society is able to actively participate in the transitional justice process and it is an excellent opportunity for smaller victims groups working at the local level to implement targeted projects in support of the engagement of victims, particularly women and those from marginalized communities, who have been largely excluded from the process to date.

More broadly, this project is part of OHCHR's strategy to fight widespread impunity in Nepal, both in relation to violations committed during the conflict, and on-going violations and abuses that have been committed since the peace process began. OHCHR considers accountability central to a successful peace process

Civil society's role in standing up for human rights was of course hugely important and influential during the Jana Andolan and in the establishment of the peace process in Nepal. At that time there was a level of focus, coordination and direct engagement that demonstrated the full potential of civil society to promote change in Nepal. It is vital that civil society again plays this role to ensure that the peace process remains on track, and I encourage you all to rekindle that spirit and work in unison again to achieve vital human rights goals, and ensure that the gains that were made at that time are not lost. With this in mind I would also encourage all elements of civil society to actively engage in the constitution making process and to make their views known on what they want to see in relation to human rights in the constitution.

I am also aware of the significant challenges that many human rights defenders face when working at the grassroots level, including intimidation, threats, and worse. As you may be aware, the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders has been requesting to conduct a visit to Nepal since 2003, but has yet to receive an invitation from the government. My office and our partners are working to encourage the government to issue an invitation now so that a visit can take place soon, ideally in early 2010. As part of these advocacy efforts I would encourage you all, through your own networks and offices, to work for this visit which would allow an expert examination of the reality of the situation facing human rights defenders in Nepal, and give the opportunity for concrete recommendations to be made for improvements.

We are, of course, well aware of your initiative in bringing OHCHR to Nepal in 2005. I have been very gratified to receive support from our friends and partners in the civil society in Nepal for our continued presence here.

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I look forward to talking with you in person at the end of today's programme when drinks and snacks will be served. Now I will hand over to my colleague Andrew Palmer who will provide a short presentation on the contents of the Handbook and the *Peace through Justice* project.

Thank you.