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Sindhupalchowk, Nepal

Today I have visited the district of Sindhupalchowk, in order to gain a better understanding of some of the human rights issues facing rural communities here. I met with a group of women in Sindhupalchowk, to listen to their concerns about human rights. And I also visited a police station in the village of Balephi, where I learned more about challenges facing police trying to re-establish a presence in rural areas where they have long been absent.

Listening to this group of about 20 women brought home to me once again the terrible impact the conflict has had on the whole range of human rights - economic, social and cultural rights as well as civil and political rights. The lack of basic government services, such as in health and education, and the impact of long conflict have all contributed to stifling development initiatives in Nepal over the last decade.

I also heard about the difficulties many women face when they seek protection or redress through the legal system, especially victims of gender-based violence. The challenges they face in pursuit of justice are severe: stigmatisation, lack of support structures, protection and legal aid systems, and the lack of investigations and punishment of perpetrators are all impediments to justice. Women from marginalized groups in society, such as Dalit communities, have even more difficulty: in effect they are doubly discriminated against. It is vital that legislation is reformed and that the authorities and civil society help to create a safe and protective environment in which women can seek help and redress. My Office in Nepal is focused on working with all concerned to improve access to justice for women in Nepal.

My meeting with police in Balephi village also helped to give me a practical insight into the challenges of re-establishing a functioning law enforcement and criminal justice system in Nepal, especially in rural communities. From my discussions, it is clear that professional, community policing is essential for the protection of human rights at the community level - during the peace process, the elections themselves and for the long term - and that at the moment there is a long way to go before this can be achieved in most rural communities in Nepal.

Police officers assigned to rural areas are facing many challenges. It is essential that the CPN (Maoist) fulfill its commitments and does not obstruct the re-establishment of police posts so that a police presence can be established throughout the country as soon as possible. It is also essential

that the Government fully supports the police to ensure that they are properly resourced and perform to the highest standards. Likewise, they must reflect the societies they serve and, thus, the police in this country must include adequate representation of women and ethnic, indigenous and other marginalized groups among their ranks.

In this critical period leading up to elections, police will have a vital role to play in helping to ensure a climate free of fear and intimidation and that political rights are respected. Providing security through civilian policing is among the most important of the State's human rights obligations – police must be properly trained – including in appropriate use of force so that they can fulfill these duties and gain the confidence of all parties and communities. My Office in Nepal has been providing human rights training to the Nepal Police and we are committed to stepping up this training in the period ahead to ensure that all police officers have the knowledge and skills to protect and promote human rights in all aspects of their work.

I was struck by the practical vision and leadership of the women from Sindhupalchowk. They have much to offer Nepal, and it is also essential that their energies and skills, and those of women like them throughout the country, are fully utilized in the public sphere during the peace process.

The experience of the conflict in Nepal shows that it is often the people in rural communities who suffered human rights violations most directly. Re-establishing the rule of law in rural communities is one of the greatest human rights responsibilities of the Government. My Office in Nepal looks forward to working with police during this critical period of transition leading to Constituent Assembly election, and to helping the police service fulfill its essential role in maintaining law and order in a manner which fully protects and promotes human rights.