



**Statement by Richard Bennett
Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
At the Greater National Political Conference
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Honorable Speaker, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, Ian Martin, distinguished guests. Namaste. I would like to thank the organizers for asking me to speak today.

The current challenge to the peace process is not only to break the impasse among the largest political parties but also to promote and protect the human rights of marginalized groups who have very legitimate demands and grievances on issues of representation, effective participation and non-discrimination, including in the constituent assembly and the future structure of the state. Unless all voices are heard and these principles respected, there is a genuine challenge to the sustainability of the peace process as a whole.

OHCHR-Nepal notes that the process of dialogue has not entirely reflected the views of all marginalized groups, and this creates challenges to the implementation of agreements that have been or will be reached, since not all groups feel common ownership or that they have been genuinely consulted. Therefore, it is essential for the government to develop a more comprehensive approach to dialogue on issues of representation, participation and non-discrimination with Dalit, Madheshi, Adivasi/Janajati, other marginalized groups and women.

The international treaties are not only obligations for the government but can serve as a guiding framework on how this process of comprehensive dialogue can be undertaken. For example, the recently ratified Convention ILO 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples lays out principles of consultation and participation for indigenous peoples, as well as how land rights must be addressed. The principle of non-discrimination, right to representation and participation are also enshrined in the international human rights treaties which the government has ratified: ICCPR, ICESCR, CERD, CRC, CEDAW. These treaties can guide the government's dialogue with Madheshi, Dalit, women, and other groups.

It is imperative that this process of dialogue is not Kathmandu-centered but is genuinely consultative and reflects the views of those at the geographical margins in remote and isolated parts of Nepal. A dialogue with the Adivasi/Janajatis must reflect the views of all Adivasi/Janajati groups in Nepal, including the Janajati groups in the east, as well as the smaller Adivasi/Janajati groups in the Terai who do not have adequate representation or a voice at the national level. Some of these Adivasi/Janajati groups are highly marginalized and in danger of losing their language, identity and culture. This threat to their individual and collective rights must be recognized and protected.

OHCHR notes that the voices of Dalits in remote parts of the country are also not genuinely reflected in the national dialogue, and that Dalit groups are the least

represented in decision making and state structures. Their voices are the weakest at the district and national level. It is not sufficient to abolish untouchability in law; it must also be abolished in practice by state actors and members of the community both in the Terai and in the hills. Also, any discussions on the future of the state must ensure that minority rights are protected in Adivasi/Janajati areas. Representation, participation and non-discrimination of Dalits must be ensured within discussions of the future of the state relating to Adivasi/Janajati and Madheshi issues.

Last but not least, women – and in particular women from all marginalized groups – must also have a strong voice and representation in this process of dialogue with government.

In closing, I would like to congratulate the organizers for bringing together different groups as part of a greater national dialogue. OHCHR stands ready to provide support on technical matters of human rights. We will continue to advocate for the voices of marginalized peoples, particularly for those voices to be heard in this peace process. Thank you.