



**Statement by Richard Bennett
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Delivered at a Programme on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with
Disabilities and its Optional Protocol
Organized by the Nepal Disabled Human Rights Centre to mark
International Day of Disabled Persons, 3 December
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Members of the Nepal Disabled Human Rights Centre, Colleagues and Friends,

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today, the eve of the International Day of Disabled Persons. I would first like to report that as of 29 October, 118 countries have signed the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* – the first comprehensive human rights treaty of the 21st century, which opened for signature on 30 March this year and which marks a paradigm shift in attitudes and approaches to people with disabilities; 67 countries have signed the Optional Protocol; seven countries have ratified the Convention, including India, while three countries have ratified the protocol.

Those numbers appear impressive but it is important to note that 20 ratifications are required for the Convention to come into force, or 13 more than we have today. OHCHR-Nepal is urging the Government of Nepal to sign and ratify the Convention as soon as possible, and I am pleased to report that in a meeting I had with the Foreign Minister last week, she assured me that the Government is taking action in this regard. Of course, endorsement by the national assembly is also necessary and is encouraged.

By signing the Convention, States send a strong signal to persons with and without disabilities that their governments are committed to protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, and that improved enjoyment of human rights requires action, not only promises. This Convention illuminates both the blatant and the hidden ways in which beliefs, behaviours, practices and laws serve to deprive persons with disabilities from their entitlement to achieve their fullest personal development and to contribute, like everyone else, to the common good.

I think it is important to note that disabilities include not only obvious physical disabilities but also more hidden ones, such as deafness, intellectual disabilities and mental illness. According to the 2001 census, 24.6 percent of disabled persons named deafness as their disability while 12.7 percent were considered mentally disabled. Because they are not visible, this latter group of disabilities are often ignored or, worse, hidden from public view for fear of stigmatization. The articles in the Convention apply equally to all disabilities.

When the Convention comes into force, a new treaty body, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, will be established. The Committee will comprise independent experts, including experts with disabilities. There will be several ways for disabled persons' organizations, and others, to engage with the Committee. For example, the new Convention stipulates that States must consult with and actively engage persons with disabilities through their representative organizations in relevant decision-making processes, including in the nomination of experts for the Committee.

Since April 2006, this country's political leaders have been promising to create a new Nepal which will treat every individual equally, be they from the historically dominant or the historically marginalized groups, be they man or woman. People with disabilities continue to push for assurances that political leaders are really committed to translating these words into action. One very simple step, which would nonetheless send a very strong signal, would be for the State to ensure that all processes for the upcoming Constituent Assembly elections are accessible to persons with disabilities so that they can enjoy their right to stand for office and to cast their ballot, as all voters must.

OHCHR is committed to assisting the people of Nepal to ensure that the nation that you are building in this post-conflict phase is one that makes room for and respects the rights of all peoples, especially those who have been historically marginalized, such as persons with disabilities. I would like to encourage you to view my participation here today as the beginning of a dialogue, through which we can deepen our partnership in order to ensure the promotion and protection of the human rights of persons with disabilities. Our Office in Geneva has recently produced a handbook on the Convention, designed to educate parliamentarians, which we think could be a useful advocacy tool for disabled persons' organizations. It is available to download from our website (<http://nepal.ohchr.org>) and hard copies will soon be arriving in our Office.

Please contact our Public Information and Outreach Unit if you would like further information and don't hesitate to suggest how we can support your aims.

Once again, thank you for inviting me here today.