



**Statement by Ai Kihara-Hunt
Acting Chief, Far Western Regional Office, OHCHR-Nepal**

Delivered at the NHRC Exhibition Day, Dhangadhi, 22 April 2007

Dear Honored Guests, Colleagues and Friends,

I am happy to see so many new faces here today, at this occasion of the National Human Rights Commission Human Rights Exhibition Day. I would first like to congratulate the initiative, efforts and great ideas of the National Human Rights Commission, human rights defenders and civil society organizations, to make this Exhibition Day happen here in Dhangadhi.

I know that some of you might be unfamiliar with OHCHR-Nepal, so I'd like to first take a minute to introduce the Office to you. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is based in Geneva. It opened its doors in Nepal in May 2005. The headquarters are in Kathmandu, and it has regional offices in Biratnagar, Pokhara, Nepalgunj, here in Dhangadhi and another in Kathmandu for the Central Region. We will also be opening a sub-office in Janakpur soon.

OHCHR operates according to an Agreement with the Government of Nepal, which has just been renewed for another two years. Its mandate includes these objectives:

- To monitor the observance of human rights throughout the country;
- Advise authorities on creating and implementing policies and programmes for the promotion and protection of human rights, and;
- Provide advisory service and support to the National Human Rights Commission, representatives of human rights NGOs, civil society and individuals.

I know that these words sound important, but what exactly do they mean? Since 2005 our Office has focused its work in three areas. First, impunity is a major threat to human rights protection, so resolving all outstanding cases of disappearances and holding accountable those who committed serious human rights abuses during the conflict, from both parties to the conflict, is a priority. International experience has shown that this task, though difficult and challenging, is essential to creating durable and sustainable peace. While some people will argue that no investigation or prosecution should be undertaken that might disturb the fragile peace process, OHCHR believes that true peace is impossible if past human rights violations are not addressed.

Addressing longstanding discrimination and the social exclusion of such Nepalese as Dalits, indigenous peoples, Madheshis, people with disabilities, sexual minorities and exploited groups such as ex-Kamaiyas is another of OHCHR's priorities. In the peace process Nepal has the opportunity to take great strides in creating a State in which such

debilitating forms of discrimination are eliminated and in which equality is guaranteed and practiced for the benefit of all, including women.

OHCHR-Nepal's third focus has been the establishment of an effective system for law enforcement and the administration of justice, one that conforms to international human rights obligations. This includes a professional police force that understands and respects the human rights of the citizens it serves. It also means reviewing the make-up of the police force to ensure that marginalized groups are adequately represented.

OHCHR-Nepal was encouraged to see the many human rights provisions in November's Comprehensive Peace Agreement, and that the new government renewed the pledge to respect human rights in its Common Minimum Programme of Action. The CPA also requests OHCHR to monitor the document's human rights provisions.

With preparations for Constituent Assembly elections underway, our Office has focused attention on the rights, and obligations of political parties and other political actors. In recent meetings with local political and civil society leaders at the district level, we have discussed how these rights and obligations might actually be translated into action.

For example, political actors must respect the rights of voters to freely choose their representatives and to participate in any lawful political activity. The media, in their role as democracy watch-dogs, must be allowed to report on all aspects of the election campaign without fear of intimidation or repercussions. Political actors should also ensure that all other actors have freedom of movement so that they can disseminate information to all voters, and that voters are also able to move about freely in order to obtain information about the political process and their voting options, and to participate in peaceful assemblies.

Other human rights are also under the spotlight in the peace process. These include the right of internally displaced people to return, unhindered, to their villages and to take possession of their homes and land without threat or intimidation. The CPA includes many provisions guaranteeing these rights, which OHCHR is also monitoring.

Finally, I'd like to say a few words about our Far Western Regional Office here in Dhangadhi. The Office first saw the light of day as a sub-office in Dadeldhura. After nearly half a year there (including a very cold winter) I was happy to see OHCHR decide to set up its permanent Office here in Dhangadhi, where we moved into in late February. Since then we have been gradually growing and hope to see that growth continue.

We are very happy with the reception we have got from the people of Dhangadhi and with the co-operation we have received from the NHRC and other human rights defenders, civil society organizations, government and political parties. Today's event symbolizes a good cooperation we continue to have. We hope also to have the chance to meet and speak with many of you in the course of our work here.

Thank you.