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Nepal enacts law criminalizing religious conversion

Threat to Christians increases, offenders face up to five years in prison.

UCA News (26.10.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2yT0lh1> - Nepal has enacted a law criminalizing religious conversion, joining neighbors India and Pakistan in a regional bloc in which the small Christian minority faces increasing government threats to their faith and beliefs.

The "Nepali government [has] taken a regressive step as this law severely restricts our freedom of expression and our freedom of religion or belief," said Tanka Subedi, chairman of Nepals Religious Liberty Forum.

The bill was signed into law last week by President Bidhya Devi Bhandari and enshrines additional constitutional protection for Hinduism, which 80 percent of the population follows, the Christianity Today website reported.

The new law restricts religious conversion, bans the "hurting of religious sentiment," and blasphemy.

Offenders face a punishment of five years imprisonment and penalty of fifty thousand rupees [approximately US\$770].

The new law comes a decade after the ousted Hindu monarchy declared Nepal a secular state, and two years after the country adopted a new constitution.

Article 26 of the constitution says that, "No one shall attempt to change or convert someone from one religion to another, or disturb/jeopardize the religion of others, and such acts/activities shall be punishable by law."

Christian Solidarity Worldwide founder Mervyn Thomas said anti-conversion laws often target religious minorities and worsen religious tensions.

"We urge the Nepali government to repeal this unjust law and amend Article 26 (3) of the constitution as they both curtail the right to freedom of religion or belief and undermine Nepal's commitments under international law," he said in a statement.

Nepal has seen its Christian population triple in recent years because of conversions. Christians make up 1.4 percent of Nepal's 29 million people.

Four Nepali Christians imprisoned for 'witchcraft' prayers released after 9 months

By Stoyan Zaimov

Christian Post (29.09.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2gJvkFF> - Four Nepali Christians who were sentenced for "violence and witchcraft" for praying with a mentally ill woman have been released after nine months in prison.

Persecution watchdog [International Christian Concern](#), which led a petition in their name, reported on Wednesday that Lali Pun, Bimkali Budha, Ruplal Pariyar and his wife, Ganga, have all been released after their sentences were reversed.

"International Christian Concern is so pleased that this situation has reached its rightful resolution. However, the imprisonment of these Christians should have never taken place as the facts of their innocence were clear," said Nate Lance, ICC's advocacy manager.

"This is a step in the right direction for religious freedom in Nepal, but there is still much work to be done. No one should fear imprisonment for the free expression and practice of their religion."

The Christians were convicted back in December after the father-in-law of Seti Pariyar, the mentally ill woman, accused them of abuse.

The father-in-law had reportedly brought the woman to a local church in hopes that prayers could heal her.

Pariyar apparently left the prayer service at the time, and was later found in a forest "harming herself and yelling before being taken home."

Although Pariyar and her husband later testified in District Court that the Christians were not abusive toward her, with the woman even claiming that she had been healed, the four were still found guilty and sentenced to prison.

In August, the minority Christian population in Nepal found itself in fear of a government crackdown after the country's parliament passed a bill criminalizing religious conversions and the "hurting of religious sentiment," which critics say aims to restrict evangelism.

The U.K.-based Christian Solidarity Worldwide [pointed out](#) at the time that certain clauses in the bill are similar to controversial blasphemy laws in other countries, such as Pakistan, which are often used to target Christians and other minorities. ICC described the wrongful imprisonment of the four Christians and the new anti-conversion laws as "Nepal's continued backslide on issues of religious freedom." C.B. Gahatraj, general secretary of the Federation of National Christians, Nepal, told [The Christian Post](#) in January that believers face a number of challenges in the country, such as a lack of burial land, forcing some to bury relatives hidden away in forests.

"When Christians die in Nepal, they have two pains. One is they suffer, they grieve because of their loved ones who are no more; secondly, they have no place to bury their loved ones," Gahatraj told CP at the time.

"If Hindus find Christians buried in their area, they force Christians to dig them out from the graveyard, and bury the bodies in another place."

Christians in Nepal sentenced to prison for praying for ill woman are released

Morning Star News (22.09.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2htbP0p> - Four Christians in Nepal sentenced to five years in prison on false charges of "witchcraft" and "violence" were released today after a high court annulled their convictions, church leaders said.

Lali Pun, Bimkali Budha, Suk Lal Pariyar and Ganga Pariyar had been accused in Salyan District Court on May 19, 2016 for praying for a mentally troubled woman, Seti Pariyar, according to the Federation of National Christian Nepal (FNCN). On Dec. 19, 2016 they were convicted of witchcraft, violence and holding Seti Pariyar against her will, though the woman testified that she was not mistreated or captive and had been healed by the prayer.

Besides the prison sentences, the Christians had been told to pay a fine of 50,000 Nepalese rupees (US\$475), an overwhelming sum in Nepal. A fifth Christian, Rupa Thapa, was arrested with them but was declared not guilty and released in 2016.

"FNCN would like to thank Higher Court, Surkhet for setting free our innocent people," said FNCN co-general secretary Sagar Baizu in the statement. "We would also like to inform you all that the FNCN has already arranged the shelter and other things for the victimized people and education for their children."

FNCN representatives had petitioned for the Christians' release, and on Sept. 10 High Court Surkhet Judges Mahesh Sharma Paudel and Krishna Thapa invalidated the Dec. 19, 2016 convictions by the Salyan District Court, Baizu said.

Relatives of Seti Pariyar, said to be mentally ill, had taken her to the four Christians' Samuel Church for healing prayer in Kubine-4, Jiamire, Salyan District, on May 19, 2016, according to the FNCN. Accusing her of witchcraft, the relatives had raked her "with stinging nettle and fed her stool" while bringing her to the church, the FNCN reported.

The four Christians were not charged for months after their arrest, according to the FNCN. The umbrella body said accusers intentionally twisted the facts to fabricate a case against the four Christians, and that authorities forced them to sign a document whose contents the accused did not know.

Area church leaders believe the four Christians were set up.

"There is a risk that this type of well-designed plan can happen any time among the Christian community," an earlier FNCN statement noted, concluding that the Christians were targeted for their faith.

"About the incident, the victims told us face-to-face that what they have done is for the benefit of the sick woman, as she was brought by her relatives for prayer for healing," the FNCN statement noted.

Seti Pariyar's husband also testified that she was not mistreated or held against her will.

The arrest and conviction of the four Christians came at a time when Nepal's Hindu majority was increasingly influencing authorities to harass Christians. While Nepal has long outlawed evangelization, a new constitution in 2015 and the release of

implementing laws last month reinforced existing prohibitions against evangelizing, and Hindu interests have used them to falsely accuse Christians.

Last year a court dropped charges against eight Christians who had been wrongly arrested for distributing Christian comic books in a Christian school.

Under the implementing laws approved on Aug. 8, those convicted of converting or undermining “the religion, faith or belief that any caste, ethnic group or community has been observing since eternal times” can be sentenced to up to five years in prison. A conviction for “hurting religious sentiment” can result in up to two years in prison and a fine.

In the harassment of eight Christians last year, seven men and one woman were arrested in Charikot, Dolakha District in June 2016 as part of a crack-down on Christian activities in the fledgling democracy. They were reportedly mistreated in jail before being released on bail.

While the new constitution passed in September 2015 establishes Nepal as a secular and democratic republic, its definition of “secular” appears to protect Hinduism and allows others only to worship in their own faiths. Article 26 forbids anyone to “convert a person of one religion to another religion, or disturb the religion of other people.”

Advocacy groups have recently detected increased enforcement and other anti-Christian efforts as officials seek to placate Hindus incensed that the new constitution did not re-establish a more prominent place for Hinduism.

The eight Christians were acquitted on Dec. 6, 2016 after being charged with trying to convert children to Christianity. They were using the comic booklets as part of a counseling program for children traumatized by earthquakes on April 25, 2015 and May 12, 2015.

The Christians were arrested after Teach Nepal, a Kathmandu-based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), organized two trauma counseling sessions at two schools in Charikot. The earthquake trauma sessions took place at Modern Nepal School and Mount Valley Academy in Charikot, with children receiving a small gift pack that included the 23-page Christian comic book.

A landlocked country between the giants of India and China, Nepal is said to be more than 75 percent Hindu and 16 percent Buddhist. Christians are estimated to make up nearly 3 percent of Nepal’s population, and Muslims 4.4 percent.

In 2009, the Hindu extremist Nepal Defense Army bombed a Catholic Mass at the Assumption Church in the capital city of Kathmandu, killing two women and a schoolgirl.

Christian worker shot at Easter says he's still fearful



Santosh Khadka on the street in Kathmandu where he was shot while returning home from an Easter service

By Vishal Arora

World Watch Monitor (14.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2uki1QU> - Three months ago, on 16 April, Christian worker Santosh Khadka was shot in Kathmandu while he was returning home from an Easter service. Police have not been able to identify the attackers, but local Christians say Khadka was targeted because of his religious-freedom work, as some groups in this young democracy are calling for the reinstatement of Hinduism as the state religion.

The Federation of National Christian, Nepal, where Khadka works as an office secretary, called the shooting a “cowardly act” and an attack on “the whole Christian community”.

Two days after the attack on Khadka in Kathmandu’s Lalitpur Municipality, unidentified men set fire to the vehicles of one of the biggest Catholic churches in Nepal, Assumption Church in Kathmandu. In May 2009, three people died after a bomb exploded inside the same church during a Saturday Mass.

Attacks on Christians seem to have increased after a new constitution came into effect on 20 September 2015. The charter recognises only partial religious freedom. It effectively bans evangelism, as it states that no-one is allowed to make an attempt to convert

people of other religions to his or her own. It also calls for the protection of Hinduism, the majority religion. However, some Hindu right-wing parties and groups still claim that Hinduism is under threat due to the possibility of more conversions to Christianity. They are also demanding that the term "secularism" be removed from the charter of Nepal, which was a Hindu monarchy until 2006.

The promulgation of the constitution was preceded by low-intensity [blasts in two churches](#) in east Nepal. Pamphlets promoting Hindu nationalism were found at each of the churches and a nationalist group, Hindu Morcha Nepal, issued a press statement calling for Christian leaders to leave the country and for converts to Christianity to return to Hinduism.

This religiously charged atmosphere makes the Christian minority vulnerable. Khadka says he has not been able to get over his fear since the shooting incident.

World Watch Monitor interviewed Khadka at the location in Kathmandu where he was attacked.

Video transcript

"Easter Sunday, that is 16 April 2017, there was a mass gathering, a programme organised by our organisation. And when we finished our programme at 5pm, I came to my office and took my bicycle and headed to my house. It was almost 7.30pm," Khadka recalled.

"Almost 200 or 300 metres ahead, I heard a sound of [something] bursting behind me. And I was just riding the bicycle. And I thought that street children were playing with crackers and they threw it on me. So I ignored it, and kept on driving. And [after] going almost 20 to 30 metres ahead, I stopped my bike to see if my bike was punctured. But I found that my bike was OK. And I again started to ride my bicycle. And I reached an English service, a church service nearby my house. I was feeling a little bit [of] pain in my left waist. While sitting there for 10 to 15 minutes, I felt something wet in my waist, so I [asked] my friend to look. When he did, he was shocked. It was blood."

Pointing to the spot where he was shot, Khadka said, "That is the place, you know. From there, this road goes to [that] side. That was the place, the exact place."

He added, "I was entered into an operation hall. And by the grace of God, the doctors were successful in removing the bullet from my body after the hard work of three hours."

Khadka explained why he believes the attack was due to his Christian work.

"It is communal violence because, the day after my incident, the same group ... I think the same group ... burnt the vehicles of a Catholic church, the Assumption Church [in Kathmandu]," he said. "[Some Hindu] majority groups always want to suppress us, and they want to discourage us."

Khadka added, "Two days after [the incident], our office organised a press meet. It was a national press meet. And it was organised to pressure the government to give safety for the Christian community, and to provide protection for the churches."

"Physically I'm fully recovered," he said, and added, "I've just got a mark of three or four centimetres over here. I'm not getting any [sensation]. It is [without any sensation]. Maybe the vein or the nerve may be disconnected. And I think it will be healed in the coming days. I hope so; God will heal this wound very soon. I don't have any complication with my wound.

"But psychologically, I'm a little bit disturbed. When I walk on the street alone, if somebody came behind me, I'd be shocked. I would turn and look who is he, why is he coming? But I'm an optimistic person, so I think God will make me free of that psychological fear also."

Arson attack on cathedral compound frightens Nepal's Catholics

"From time to time we Catholics here feel discriminated against, and, even though we are Nepalese citizens, we are treated [by a small minority of Nepalese] like foreigners."

By Maria Lozano

Aid to Church in Need (28.04.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2qIT5UP> - An arson attack on the cathedral Church of Apostolic Vicariate of Nepal has left the country's small Catholic community in a state of shock.

The April 18, 2017 incident attack also damaged the rectory attached to Church of the Assumption, on the outskirts of the capital city of Kathmandu. No one was injured. Nonetheless, the vicar general of the vicariate, Father Silas Bogati, told international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need that the attack "has harmed the tiny Catholic community, which is now afraid. We are trusting in God, but what has happened is a call to be vigilant."

The attack happened as Nepal is experiencing a very delicate political situation, with local elections slated for May 14, 2017—the first such vote in 20 years. Parliamentary elections are scheduled to take place in January 2018.

Father Bogati reported that at least three individuals entered the church compound during the night, using gasoline to set fire to two motorcycles and a car. Ten people were sleeping in the rectory building that night. The priest said: "Thank God the vehicle they set on fire did not explode while the people were being evacuated, but it could well have been a tragedy."

He continued: "We still don't know who was behind it, nor the motives for the attack. The police are investigating the event and attempting to identify the three people seen on the security cameras. Once we know more about the perpetrators, we will be clearer about their motives. For now everything would be speculation."

The Nepalese priest did however acknowledge that "from time to time we Catholics here feel discriminated against, and, even though we are Nepalese citizens, we are treated [by a small minority of Nepalese] like foreigners, based on the mere fact of being Christians. [For that reason], in some sectors of society there are feelings of hostility towards the Christian community."

In May 2009 a bomb exploded inside the cathedral just as Father Bogati was saying Mass. Three people were killed and more than a dozen sustained injuries. Responsibility for that attack was claimed by a Hindu fundamentalist group calling itself the Nepal Defense Army.

The Catholic Church in Nepal, despite comprising just some 8,000 faithful, is very active in the area of social services and development. For example, the Church is involved in the rebuilding of 5000 homes that were badly damaged in the major earthquake that struck the country two years ago; another project aims to restore water supply to various neighborhoods. The vicar general said that the Church is "helping people regardless of their religious affiliation. Our vocation is to help the most needy, as we are helping the victims of the earthquake today."

A former Hindu kingdom, Nepal formally became a secular state in 2007 after a decade of conflict between the government and Maoist rebels. A new constitution was adopted in summer 2015 that affirms the secular character of Nepal, while still safeguarding the primacy of Hinduism at the expense of religious minorities, including the sizeable Muslim and Buddhist communities. The number of Protestants in Nepal is close to 1 million; the total population is approx. 28 million. The upcoming elections will be crucial for strengthening the country's still fragile political stability.
