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Christians in Nepal attacked as constitutional deadline nears

Bomb goes off in front of charity office; preachers assaulted, church building razed

By Sudeshna Sarkar

Compass Direct News (25.11.2011) / HRWF (29.11.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.org> – Two years after an explosion shook one of the biggest Catholic churches in Nepal and killed three people, the underground group that orchestrated the attack claimed responsibility for another bomb blast this week.

A crude bomb went off Tuesday afternoon (Nov. 22) in front of a leading Christian charitable organization's office in this capital city, sowing fresh fear and insecurity among Christians ahead of a critical constitutional deadline. On the same day in the northeastern district of Sindhupalchowk, local residents of the predominantly Buddhist village of Danchhe assaulted two brothers for leading worship services at their home, leaving one unconscious.

Police said they were investigating the explosion in front of the office of the United Mission to Nepal (UMN). While the crude bomb claimed no casualties or damage to the UMN office, it shocked area Christians. The UMN, a Christian international non-governmental organization founded in 1954 by Christian groups from almost 60 countries, has built hospitals, schools, hydropower plants and industrial development and training institutions in Nepal.

At the site police found leaflets signed by someone calling himself a senior member of the Nepal Defense Army (NDA), a militant armed group that has terrorized Christians and Muslims, demanding that they leave Nepal. The leaflets asserted that the majority population in Nepal was Hindu and that therefore it should be a Hindu state. The leaflets also accused the UMN of converting Hindus to Christianity.

Though there was no immediate reaction from the UMN, Nepal's Christian community expressed shock.

"It is ironic that the blast occurred on the eve of the International Day against Impunity," said Chirendra Satyal, spokesman of the Assumption Church, where a bomb placed by the NDA in 2009 killed two women and a schoolgirl. "The government of Nepal is treating the lives of Nepalis as expendable by planning to grant amnesty to leaders of the NDA."

The mastermind of the church attack, NDA chief Ram Prasad Mainali, was arrested within four months and put behind bars, but he retained his criminal links. Earlier this year, police said they arrested six people who admitted they were under Mainali's instructions to set off fresh explosions in public places.

Despite the revelation, Nepal's new government has begun negotiations with the NDA, offering amnesty for Mainali and other jailed leaders of the group if it agrees to lay down arms.

"With Christmas coming closer, we are afraid of further attacks," said Satyal. "There will be larger prayer and festive gatherings, and our churches don't have the resources to ensure their security."

The National Christian Federation of Nepal, an umbrella of Protestant organizations, has met Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai, urging him to ensure security for religious minorities and form a special team to investigate the blast.

"This is a highly sensitive issue," said C.B. Gahatraj, general secretary of the federation. "There are growing attacks on religious minorities."

In its memorandum to the prime minister, the federation detailed other recent attacks on Christians. On Tuesday (Nov. 22), two brothers who are Christian preachers came under assault in their village. Panchman Tamang, a 45-year-old school teacher in Sindhupalchowk, a district in the northeast, and his elder brother Buddhiman, a farmer in his 50s, were attacked by local residents of their predominantly Buddhist Danchhe village for leading worship services at their home.

Gahatraj said the mob attacked the brothers' house armed with daggers and wooden batons. When the pair tried to flee, they were pelted with stones. Though Panchman managed to escape, Buddhiman was knocked unconscious. As he was bleeding profusely, the attackers left him for dead.

Later that night, Panchman came back and managed to take his brother to another town for medical care, Gahatraj said. Suffering from a serious head injury, Buddhiman was referred to hospitals in Kathmandu.

Gahatraj said the brothers had taken refuge in another town, unable to return to their village for fear of further attacks.

Sindhupalchowk is one of the poorest districts in Nepal, and the primarily Buddhist, ethnic Tamang community residents have a low literacy level.

"Though Nepal was declared secular five years ago, there is growing persecution of Christians today," said Chandra Shrestha, pastor at the Nepali Evangelical Church in Bhaktapur, a temple town close to Kathmandu.

A building of a branch of Shrestha's church in central Nepal's Kavre district was demolished by villagers last month, and neither police nor the district administration came to the aid of the Christian community, the pastor said.

In October, when Nepal celebrated its biggest Hindu festival (Dashain), during which the country shuts down for almost a month, local Hindus tore down the little one-storey

church building constructed by the Christians four years ago because the Christians declined to participate in Hindu celebrations, preferring instead to hold a two-day fellowship event.

The attackers also beat six worshippers, including women and the preacher, who was recovering from a serious operation.

"It's a poor village that has no hospital or even health post, and people fall sick regularly," Shrestha said. "There is also a high incidence of drinking."

Several people became Christians when they were cured through prayers and gave up drinking, Shrestha said.

"There was a perceptible change," the pastor said. "But it was not liked by the liquor mafia, so the attack could have been instigated by them. Both the government and the administration remain oblivious to Christians' plight. This neglect has been encouraging the attackers. The government has been treating us like second-class citizens."

Once the only Hindu kingdom in the world, Nepal became secular in 2006 and a federal republic after an election in 2008.

The electorate was promised that parliament would draft a new constitution within two years to uphold the secular nature of the nascent republic, but a succession of governments has failed to meet the challenge.

As the fourth deadline to put forth a constitution dawns on Wednesday (Nov. 30), a document is still far from ready. Instead, yesterday (Nov. 24), the government once again began the process of extending the deadline, asking for six months more.

The delay and the mounting lawlessness during the transition have left Christians increasingly frustrated.

"We Christians had been praying devoutly that the new constitution be ready in time," Shrestha said. "So it's natural that we will feel frustrated by the delay. We are not certain, though, that the new constitution will give us what we want."

A draft of the document says that though people would have the freedom to follow whichever religion they want, conversions would be prohibited.

"With conversions still deemed a crime in the suggested constitution, we feel that the draft retains the bias towards Christians," Shrestha said. "This is a direct violation of our fundamental right to practice whatever religion we want."

New CSW briefing highlights risks posed by anti-conversion proposals in new constitution and penal code

CSW (23.08.2011) / HRWF (24.08.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.org> - With only eight days until the latest deadline for the new constitution to be agreed in Nepal, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW*) has argued in a new briefing that current proposals on religious freedom are inconsistent with international human rights treaties, and has proposed amendments to the wording.

The briefing, '[Protecting religious freedom for a new Nepal](#)', argues that it is not appropriate for proposed anti-conversion clauses to be incorporated in the new

constitution, and that there is a risk that these proposals, which are inconsistent with international human rights framework, may be approved without proper scrutiny.

The briefing also raises concerns about similar anti-conversion clauses proposed for a new penal code.

CSW's briefing supersedes a previous edition, published three months before the first deadline for a new constitution to be drafted, 28 May 2010. The new constitution marks the final stage in Nepal's transition from a Hindu monarchy to a secular democracy.

The briefing states that the proposed provision that "no person shall be entitled to convert another person from one religion to another", carried over from previous constitutions, "leaves no space for interpreting a religious conversion as a positive choice, or taking a rights-based approach, such as that with which the CA [Constituent Assembly] is tasked in Nepal."

The briefing raises concerns that this type of legislation has a record in south Asia for heightening prejudice and violence against religious minorities. "In the report of her 2008 mission to India, the former Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Asma Jahangir, indicated that she was 'deeply concerned that laws and bills on religious conversion in several Indian states are being used to vilify Christians and Muslims'. She concluded that these 'should be reconsidered since they raise serious human rights concerns'."

The proposed anti-conversion clauses are also in violation of the international human rights framework, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Nepal is a state party, and which affords all citizens the freedom "to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice".

CSW's South Asia Team Leader David Griffiths said, "Nepal's new status as a secular republic entails a shift in the place of religion in society and politics, and we are encouraging the Constituent Assembly to take this very seriously as they draft a new constitution and penal code. Nepal has a historic opportunity to leave anti-conversion measures behind, and find a new way of promoting a peaceful climate of religious pluralism through dialogue and protecting the rights of all its citizens".

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**Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is a Christian organisation working for religious freedom through advocacy and human rights, in the pursuit of justice.*

1. The deadline for the approval of the new constitution was extended for a year on 28 May 2010, and on 28 May 2011 another three-month extension was agreed. However, this was contingent on the implementation of a five-point agreement, which also included the integration of a limited number of Maoist soldiers into the army, and the resignation of the prime minister to pave the way for a government of national unity.

Nepal's churches live under threat, discrimination

Lack of official recognition exposes Christians to litigation and other perils

By Sudeshna Sarkar

Compass Direct News (18.08.2011) / HRWF (22.08.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.org> - - Defying pouring rain and flooded streets, over two dozen people have gathered faithfully at the Putalisadak Church in the heart of capital city Kathmandu for the regular Thursday evening Bible study class, bringing a smile of satisfaction on the face of Pastor Dev Kumar Chetri.

The smile fades, however, when he talks about the problems that Nepal's second-oldest church has faced due to government discrimination. Hundreds of other churches scattered through the former Hindu kingdom have faced the same problem.

The roots of the discrimination are imbedded in history. When four missionaries from neighboring India's Kerala state came to Kathmandu Valley and founded the Bethshalom Putalisadak Church in 1953, preaching non-Hindu religions was a punishable offense. A powerful Nepalese aristocrat, Col. Nara Raj Shumsher Jung Bahadur Rana, who had secretly converted to Christianity in India, helped build the Protestant church on land bought in his name and those of two others.

"As per the old laws, churches were not allowed to register as religious institutions," said Chari Bahadur Gahatraj, a Protestant pastor. "They functioned either as Non-Governmental Organizations [NGOs] or personal properties. In 2006, when Parliament formally declared Nepal secular, we thought it would change and churches would be recognized as religious institutions."

Five years later, however, discrimination against Christians continues, Gahatraj said.

"We have not even been mentioned in the new policies and programs of the government proposed in Parliament this year," he said.

The Putalisadak church suffered a crisis when two of the men who were co-owners of the land went to court to reclaim their share. The church land had to be carved up to resolve the dispute. Then it suffered another blow when the land it had bought with donations from parishioners in Lele village in neighboring Lalitpur district to build a cemetery 10 years ago could not be used due to fierce resistance by locals.

"This is the saddest story," Pastor Chetri said. "Our church records indicate there are nearly 2 million Christians and about 4,000 churches in Nepal now. But most of them don't have a final resting place, as Christianity is still not recognized in Nepal. It is as if we don't exist."

Operation World's estimate of the number of Christians in Nepal is lower than the church's - 850,801 - but the latest edition estimates a higher number of congregations, 9,780, than the Putalisadak church does.

The third-oldest church in Nepal, Nepali Isahi Mandali, founded in 1957, was also dragged to court by a resentful neighbor.

"When our congregation started growing, in 2006 we started building a bigger hall to accommodate them," said Pastor Samuel Karthak. "But it was opposed by a neighbor, who went to court. The dispute went up to the Supreme Court before it was resolved. We would have felt so much more secure if the churches had been recognized as religious institutions. However, we are still regarded as second-class citizens, and churches as places that exist only to convert people. We still don't have a voice."

Stung by government apathy, Christians this month joined forces with other excluded religious communities like Buddhists and Muslims to begin a campaign seeking an end to religious discrimination.

The Inter-Religious Secularism Protection Movement (IRSPM) is asking the government to allow churches, mosques, Buddhist monasteries and all other institutions run by religious minorities to be registered as religious institutions and be exempted from paying taxes.

"Despite ratifying several international conventions and despite becoming secular, Nepal has not recognized Buddhist monasteries, mosques, churches, Sikh gurdwaras [worship halls] and other religious institutions belonging to the religious minorities as religious trusts," said Ishu Jung Karki, IRSPM's acting coordinator. "Instead, it is nurturing laws that promote one particular religion."

The campaigners are demanding that the government amend the draft of a new penal code that has triggered widespread controversy and condemnation over the inclusion of clauses that make conversions a punishable offense. Instead, they are asking for a new Religion Act as well as Religion Commission to resolve religious disputes.

Christians make up 2.85 percent of the population of Nepal, a nation that is 16 percent Buddhist and 4.4 percent Muslim; Hindus are the majority at 75 percent, according to Operation World.

For the first time, Christians and other religious minorities are seeking proportional representation in all state organs such as the army, judiciary and civil service on the basis of population. Though Nepal's new Parliament has 601 seats with the provision that the prime minister should nominate representatives from unrepresented communities, the stipulation has been virtually ignored. Most ignored have been Christians.

The campaign has also expressed concern at strident propaganda by a section of the Nepalese media against religious minorities; these media representatives say the religious minorities' proposals aim to spread "envy, hatred and strife." The Christian community has been especially alarmed by a recent article in a popular English daily, authored by the editor of a financial newspaper, who alleged that all international NGOs that had set up office in Nepal aimed to propagate Christianity.

Perhaps the greatest concern by Christians is about the delay in promulgating a new constitution that was to have bolstered the nascent republic's secular status. The major political parties failed to meet two deadlines – one last year and one in May – to get the charter ready. A third deadline looms on Aug. 31, and it is evident that not even the first draft of the document will be ready.

The inordinate delay has given militant Hindu groups time to push for the restoration of Hinduism as the state religion and for a referendum to decide if Nepal should remain secular.

"The government should implement the new constitution by Aug. 31," reads an IRSPM press statement. "That is the mandate of the people as well as the pro-democracy movement."

The pro-democracy movement ended Hindu King Gyanendra Shah's army-backed rule and brought the political parties to power.

Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Baha'is launch appeal against anti conversion proposal

Asia News (17.08.2011) / HRWF (19.08.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.org> – If approved by parliament, the new anti-conversion provisions in Nepal's criminal code would jail anyone

involved in preaching and handing out religious material. Anyone killing cattle for its meat would suffer a similar fate.

In reaction to the draft law, religious minorities have called for amendments to the draft proposal because the suggested changes constitute a violation of religious freedom and favour Hinduism.

The decision to fight the new legislation was made at a conference held a few days ago in Kathmandu by the Interreligious Secularism Protection Movement. Proposed by Catholics, the event (pictured) brought together representatives of various religious (Protestant, Muslim, Buddhist, Baha'i) and tribal communities as well as leaders from different political parties.

The proposed changes to the criminal code went before parliament on 23 June, and were immediately controversial, raising concerns among secular-oriented parties and religious minorities. Parliament began debating the changes last Sunday and will continue for several days.

Under Article 160, anyone inducing a Hindu to convert to another religion could be prosecuted. Just talking about one's religion to others could be deemed proselytising and be punishable. Conviction could entail fines of up to US\$ 700 and five years in jail. If the offender is not Nepali, he or she could be immediately expelled.

Religious leaders and secularists propose instead a minority law and the creation of a religious affairs commission to protect the rights of religious minorities and guarantee everyone's rights, including that of Hindus, to convert to another religion.

Even though the proposed changes have not yet been approved, many noted that Hindu extremism is already growing inside Nepali institutions. This could offset decades of struggle for democracy and the separation of state and religion.

Amar Dhoj Tamang, a member of the Tamang tribe and vice president of the Tamsaling Party, said that members of this community were recently arrested in Kathmandu for killing a cow for its meat. "For centuries, the Tamang have eaten beef. Eating what we want is our right, but now we are even afraid of looking at cows for fear of arrest," he explained.

For human rights activist Charan Prasai, Hindu fundamentalist groups want to stir tensions in the population in order to undermine the legitimacy of the secular state. In their view, people should have had the right to decide whether to keep Hinduism as state religion or not when the monarchy fell in 2006. However, in his view "fundamental rights like democracy and the separation of state and religion cannot be approved or cancelled by will of the majority".

For Maoist Party member Binod Pahadi, unless changes are not made to the draft bill, the country will go back by 50 years. "If the proposal is approved in parliament, meetings such as these will no longer be possible because we will be accused of criticising the Hindu religion," he said.

Nepal Plans New Criminal Code Forbidding Evangelism

Deadline again passes for completing new constitution

By Sudeshna Sarkar

Compass Direct (02.06.2011) / HRWF (06.06.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.org> – Five years after it abolished Hinduism as the state religion, Nepal is working on a new criminal code forbidding a person from one faith to “convert a person or abet him to change his religion.”

Article 160 of the proposed code also says no one will be allowed to do anything or behave in any way that could cause a person from a caste, community or creed to lose faith in his/her traditional religion or convert to a different religion. The proposal would also prohibit conversion “by offering inducements or without inducement,” and preaching “a different religion or faith with any other intent.”

If found guilty, offenders could be imprisoned for a maximum of five years and fined up to 50,000 Nepalese rupees (US\$685). If the offender is a foreigner, he or she would be deported within seven days of completing the sentence.

Nepal’s Christian community, which has no representation in the Council of Ministers or in parliament, was caught unaware of the new criminal law in the offing.

“We have not heard of this,” said Lokmani Dhakal, general secretary of Nepal Christian Society. “We need to look into this.”

Nepal’s law and justice ministry, in consultation with judges and legal officers, drafted the new Criminal Code that, once approved by parliament, would make proclaiming Christ a punishable offense. The bill was approved by the Council of Ministers and then introduced in parliament on May 15 by Law and Justice Minister Prabhu Shah.

According to the parliament secretariat, it will be discussed by the house and then sent to the body’s Legislative Committee. If the committee approves the bill, it would return to parliament and, following further discussion, would go to the president, Dr. Ram Baran Yadav, for final approval.

Nepal’s Interim Constitution of 2007 prohibits proselytizing, according to the 2010 International Religious Freedom Report of the U.S. Department of State, even though Nepal signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1991. Article 18 of the ICCPR includes the right to manifest one’s religion, which U.N. officials have interpreted as the right to evangelistic and missionary activities.

No New Constitution

Nepal last weekend failed to complete a new constitution providing for religious freedom, thanks to a protracted battle for political power.

Once the only Hindu monarchy in the world and now the youngest federal republic, Nepal was to have unveiled the document by midnight on Saturday (May 28). But Prime Minister Jhala Nath Khanal admitted his three-month-old government had failed to fulfill its mandate and instead sought another year to write the constitution.

After marathon negotiations, opposition parties finally agreed to sign an agreement that allowed the prime minister to extend the time for completing the first draft of the new constitution by three months. The opposition, however, extracted its pound of flesh, forcing Khanal to agree to resign and pave the way for an all-party government.

As Nepal commemorated its Fourth Republic Day on Sunday (May 29), celebrations were muted in the tiny South Asian state, with public anger growing against politicians regarded as corrupt and power-hungry. Sunday marked the second time Nepal’s mammoth 601-seat parliament, which also serves as the constituent assembly elected to draft the new constitution, was unable to ready a new constitution after missing the first deadline on May 28, 2010.

"It's useless to go on extending the time allotted for the new constitution," said Chari Bahadur Gahatraj, a Protestant pastor who was also a member of the Committee for Christian Recommendations for the New Constitution. "The new constitution will never be written unless the politicians show some ethics. Otherwise, the extensions become a mere ploy for the big parties to rule the country by turns."

Amid the delays, Hindu militancy is on the upswing. The only royalist party in parliament, the Rastriya Prajatantra Party Nepal, proposed Sunday that parliament be dissolved since it failed to draft the new constitution in time. It called for fresh elections to constitute a new parliament, a step that the party thinks will lead to the restoration of a Hindu kingdom in Nepal as people become increasingly disenchanted with squabbling politicians.

Though legislators voted overwhelmingly against the proposal, the royalists, led by deposed King Gyanendra's former home minister Kamal Thapa, have sworn to start a new and stronger campaign in the days to come.

This week also saw eight Hindu organizations, led by the World Hindu Federation, flex their muscles and enforce regional general strikes for three days, paralyzing parts of the country.

The apparent reason for the strikes was the arrest of two men this month for slaughtering cows and selling the meat in a town in southern Nepal. Besides being considered sacred by Hindus, the cow is also the national animal of Nepal, and a ban on cow slaughter is still in force. Though Nepal's non-Hindu indigenous communities have been demanding that the cow, with its religious overtone, be replaced as the national animal now that Nepal is secular, a succession of Nepal governments has turned a deaf ear to the pleading.

During the general strikes, police raided two places in the capital city of Kathmandu and seized over 1,000 iron tridents that were to have been used during public demonstrations by one of the protesting Hindu groups, the Shiva Sena Nepal.

Also on the warpath are two of Nepal's largest and most privileged communities – the Chheris or warrior classes who accounted for nearly 16 percent of the population during the last census in 2001, and the Brahmins, the community of priests who accounted for over 12 percent. The two Hindu groups, who together ruled Nepal for centuries, are now seeking proportional representation in all areas of government, saying their rights are threatened by the new constitution.

Nepal's Christian minority is closely watching the upsurge in Hindu protests.

"From the very beginning, certain groups have been trying to foment instability and lawlessness, so that religious tolerance develops cracks in Nepal," said Dhakal of the Nepal Christian Society. "It is because our politicians don't have vision and have been propagating religion and community-based politics. Many of them are not happy that the number of Christians is growing in Nepal."

At the same time, in a democracy everyone has the right to freedom of expression, including Hindu extremists, Dhakal added.

"We will remain cautious about the militant Hindu campaigners, but we are not going to panic, as it will give them the importance they are seeking," he said. "Besides, not all Hindus are militant, only some."

Nepal's first Catholic bishop, Anthony Sharma, said many Christians feel betrayed.

"Not everyone is happy about the extension," he said. "We hope the legislators will not betray the people this time. However, there is a small sense of relief as well. The country was moving towards zero state [as the interim constitution, parliament and government would have been dissolved if the three-month extension had not been granted]. So there's relief at having averted that peril."

Christians begin legal battle for burial ground

Hindu group declares country a Hindu state; upper castes seek halt to conversions

By Sudeshna Sarkar

Compass Direct (19.04.2011) / HRWF (20.04.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.org> - With the government refusing to listen to their three-year plea for an official cemetery and ignoring a protracted hunger strike, Nepal's Christians are now seeking redress from the Supreme Court.

"Every day there are two to three deaths in the community, and with each death we face a hard time with the burial," said Chari Bahadur Gahatraj, a pastor who filed a petition in the high court on March 13 asking it to intervene as authorities of Nepal's oldest Hindu temple had begun demolishing the graves of Christians there.

Gahatraj and Man Bahadur Khatri are both members of the newly formed Christian Burial Ground Prayer and National Struggle Committee that since last month began leading a relay hunger strike in a public area of the capital, asking for a graveyard. They said they were forced to go to court after the Pashupati Area Development Trust (PADT), which runs Nepal's oldest Hindu shrine, the Pashupatinath temple, said it would no longer allow non-Hindus to use the temple's forested land.

"We don't want to hurt the sentiments of any community," Gahatraj told Compass. "Nor are we trying to grab the land owned by a temple. We are ready to accept any plot given to us. All we are asking for is that the burials be allowed till we get an alternate site."

Judge Awadhesh Kumar Yadav has since ordered the government and PADT not to prevent Christians from using the forest for burials until the dispute is resolved. The legal battle, however, now involves a counter-suit. Hindu activist Bharat Jangam filed a second writ on March 20, saying that since the forest was the property of a Hindu temple, non-Hindus should not be allowed to bury their dead there just as churches do not allow Hindu burials.

Subsequently, the court decided to hear the two petitions together, and yesterday (April 18), the hearings began. While two lawyers argued on behalf of Gahatraj and Khatri, a cohort of 15 lawyers spoke against their petition. The next hearing is scheduled for May 3.

Along with the legal battle, Christians have kept up their relay hunger strike. To step up pressure on the government, the protestors also announced they would lead a funeral march to the offices of the prime minister and the culture minister and hand over coffins to them as a symbolic protest. If that too failed, they warned they would have no option but to go on hunger strike in front of the prime minister's office and parliament, this time carrying dead bodies with them.

Alarmed at the rate the issue was snowballing, the government finally responded. Yesterday Culture Minister Gangalal Tuladhar opened talks with the protestors, agreeing to continue the negotiations after three days. The government also formed a four-member committee to look into the demand. Currently, Christians are asking for cemetery land in all 75 districts of Nepal.

Protestors were wary of the government's intent in the overture.

"This could be a ploy to buy time and bury the issue," said a member of the Christian committee formed to advise parliament on drafting the new constitution, who requested anonymity.

Though the committee formed to look into the Christians' demand for burial land has been asked to present a report within two weeks, Christians suspect the panel is dragging its feet.

"The new constitution has to be promulgated by May 28, but it does not seem likely that the main political parties will be able to accomplish the task," the Christian committee member said. "And if the constitution doesn't materialize in time, there will be a crisis and our problem will be shelved."

Hindu Nation

Adding to their unease, Christians are now facing a redoubled campaign by Hindu groups for the restoration of Hinduism as the state religion, five years after parliament declared Nepal, the world's only Hindu kingdom, secular.

If the new constitution had been promulgated last year, it would have consolidated secularism in Nepal. But with the country missing the deadline due to protracted power-sharing rows among the major political parties, Christians still feel under threat.

On Thursday (April 14), when the country celebrated the start of the indigenous new year 2068 with a public holiday, the Rastriya Prajatantra Party-Nepal, which seeks the reinstatement of Hinduism as the state religion, kicked off a campaign at the Bhadrakali temple in Kathmandu. As curious onlookers and soldiers patrolling the nearby army headquarters looked on, party members fervently blew into conch shells and rang bells to draw people's attention to their demand.

The party, which is also seeking the restoration of monarchy, took some oblique shots at the Christian community as well.

"There is a deliberate and systematic attempt by organizations to convert Hindus," said Kamal Thapa, party chief and a former minister. "These organizations are guided by foreign powers and foreign funds. If the widespread conversion of Hindus is not stopped immediately, we will have to take stern measures."

Three days later, an umbrella of Hindu groups – the Rastriya Dharma Jagaran Mahasabha (the National Religion Resurrection Conference) held a massive gathering in the capital, declaring Nepal a "Hindu state" and meeting with no official objection. The proclamation came as the climax to a three-day public program calling for the restoration of "the traditional Hindu state." Several Hindu preachers and scholars from neighboring India attended the program, held on the grounds of the Pashupatinath temple, which is also a UNESCO-declared World Heritage Site.

The "Hindu state" proclamation was the brainchild of Shankar Prasad Pandey, a former member of parliament from Nepali Congress, the second largest party in Nepal, now in opposition. Though Pandey was a sitting Member of Parliament in 2006, when the body

unanimously declared Nepal secular, he began opposing the move soon afterwards, leading four campaigns against it nationwide.

"I consider the nation and the Hindu religion to be more important than the party," said Pandey, known as the MP who began to go barefoot 32 years ago to show solidarity with Nepalese, who are among the poorest in the world. "Over 90 percent of the Nepalese want Nepal to be a Hindu state. However, the government is led by people whose only concern is power and money."

Pandey's campaign is supported by Hindu groups from India and the West: Narendranath Saraswati, who is the Shankaracharya or religious head of a prominent Hindu shrine in India's Varanasi city; Dr. Tilak Chaitanya, chief of a group in the United Kingdom that propagates the Gita, the holy book of the Hindus; and Tahal Kishore, head of a Hindu organization, Radha Krishna Sevashram, in the United States.

Two weeks before the May 28 deadline for the new constitution, Pandey and his followers plan to step up the campaign for a "Hindu state" in the capital. Though Pandey denies it could stir up animosity between the majority-Hindus and Christians – whose minority population is said to have crossed 2 million but is actually only 850,801, according to *Operation World* – there are fears of religious tension if not outright violence.

The Hindu rallies continue to grow as a pressure tactic. Yesterday (April 18), members of Nepal Brahman Samaj, an organization of "upper castes" from whose echelons temple priests are appointed, fought with security forces in front of parliament house, demanding their rights be respected and an end to conversions.

More *Hindutva* (Hindu nationalist) campaigning is scheduled on April 29, when the Rastriya Prajatantra Party-Nepal's Thapa has called for a mass gathering in the capital.

Christians protest to demand burial grounds

AP (23.03.2011) / HRWF (28.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.org> - Hundreds of Christians have protested in Nepal's capital, demanding the government provide designated burial grounds.

Christians complain that there are only a handful of places where they can bury their dead in the predominantly Hindu nation, where most corpses are cremated.

About 1,000 Christians held banners that read "Give us our rights, give us burial grounds" and demonstrated in the center of Katmandu on Wednesday.

Sundar Thapa, a pastor who led the protest, said they're demanding the government provide burial grounds for all Christians in all 75 districts of the country.

Christians have been protesting since a ban was imposed earlier this year on a traditional burial area next to the Pashupati temple, which is revered by Hindus in Nepal.

Hundreds of Hindu sages occupy Christian tombs in Pashupatinath

AsiaNews (26.02.2011) / HRWF (01.03.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.org> - Kathmandu, Nepal – Hundreds of Hindu sages from Nepal and India are camping out in Slesmantak forest, near the Pashupatinath temple, to protest the presence of Christian tombs, despite the fact that they were authorised by the governments. With the excuse that they were cold, many sages dug up gravestones to keep warm themselves. In so doing, they destroyed tombs. Local sources said that Maha Shivaratri, a holy day dedicated to Shiva, could turn into a day of clashes between Hindus and Christians. The event is scheduled to start on 1 March and is expected to attract half a million people.

Rampurja Baba, a sage from Maharashtra (India), said, "Pashupatinath is our holy place. Why would Christians build their graves here? We should throw them out and remove all the stones."

Pashupatinath temple is the largest Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Shiva. Pilgrims from across Asia visit the site. The existing temple building dates to the 17th century and is a UNESCO heritage site.

Until 2006, the Mool Bhatt, the temple's chief priest, was answerable only to the king of Nepal. Temple officials also kept people away the sacred grounds as well as banned cremations and burials.

With the overthrow of the monarchy and the arrival of democracy, the new, secular government allowed other religions to use the area near Slesmantak forest to bury their dead because of burial land in the capital was in short supply because of real estate speculation.

Sundar Thapa, president of the Christian advisory committee on the new constitution, has accused the government of dealing with Christian and tribal burials in a cursory manner, instigating Hindu protests. "The authorities should stop mocking us immediately and take responsibility instead for the incident caused by Hindu provocations."

For his part, Sushil Nahata, secretary of the Pashupati Area Development Trust (PADT), said, "We have had to ban non-Hindu cremation and burials to uphold UNESCO rules."

In response, local sources pointed out that the area is being polluted by Hindu cremation, which is causing deforestation. In addition, the Shiva festival will turn the place into an open-air latrine. Citing UNESCO is just a pretext to ban other religious confessions.

Nepal Christians fight for burial rights

Nearly 200 graves face demolition

Compass Direct (25.01.2011) / HRWF (26.01.2011) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Three years after the death of a Christian who was a captain in the Nepal Army, his widow, Gamala Guide, faces fresh grief.

The grave of her husband, Narayan Guide, is threatened with destruction as authorities of Nepal's most powerful Hindu temple are reclaiming the forested land where it is located.

"What kind of strange country is this that doesn't allow its own citizens to rest in peace?" the 55-year-old recently asked leaders of the Christian community in Kathmandu. "Please do something to stop the desecration, or my husband will die a second death."

At least 200 graves, many of them unmarked due to Christians' fear of discovery and destruction, could share the same fate. The Pashupatinath Area Development Trust, the organization administering the Pashupatinath temple that dates back to the fourth century AD, has begun renovating the shrine as Nepal celebrates 2011 as its "tourism year" with the goal of attracting 1 million visitors. The temple has been declared a world heritage site by UNESCO.

"In the late 1980s, the government gave us 292 hectares of land to develop the Pashupatinath temple," said Ram Saran Chimoria, director of the trust. "We have accordingly drawn up a five-year plan that will renovate the main shrine and beautify its surroundings. The forested land adjoining the temple will be used to grow plants considered sacred by Hindus."

Chimoria said part of the forest is also meant to be used for Hindu burials.

"A Hindu sect called the Dashnami, which has 10 sub-groups under it, buries its dead here, as Muslims and Christians do," he said. "Since Pashupatinath is a Hindu temple, the 10 sub-groups are allowed to bury their dead here. But other communities also began burying their dead here, first pretending to be the Dashnami and then clandestinely. This is against Hindu traditions, and the temple is seeking to reclaim what belongs to it. It is the responsibility of the government to allot burial grounds to non-Hindus, not the trust's."

The burial ground lies opposite Arya Ghat, a cremation ground at Pashupatinath, where bodies are burned on pyres according to Hindu tradition. Known as the Sleshmantak Forest, it is a steep and nearly inaccessible wooded tract where monkeys and foxes roam. Locals advise visitors not to wander into the forest alone, even during day time, for fear of robbers.

"I attended several burial rites there," said Chirendra Satyal, spokesman of the Catholic Assumption Church of Kathmandu Valley. "They were all low-key. Many of the graves are unmarked to avoid detection. The burial ground is used as a garbage dumping site, and at times foxes dig up the buried bodies. There are also cases of bodies being dumped on top of one another."

An increasingly angry Christian community, tired of petitioning the government for an official burial ground, is now seeking stronger measures.

"Nepal became secular in 2006, and two years later, we petitioned the prime minister, the culture minister and the top human rights agency in Nepal, saying that in a secular democracy Christians should have the same rights as others and should be given their own burial ground," said C.B. Gahatraj, general secretary of a Christian committee formed to provide recommendations to parliament, which is drafting a new constitution. "We understand the temple's position. But the state should understand ours too."

The committee had identified forested land on the outskirts of the Kathmandu Valley, in an area called Duwakot, and proposed that it be given to them.

"We would make it one of the most idyllic sites in Nepal," said Gahatraj. "It would have gardens and would be an attractive destination for tourists as well. But so far, there has been no response from the state."

Believing the time has come for stronger action, Christians plan to discuss the issue with 22 major parliamentary parties on Sunday (Jan. 30).

"At the meeting, we will present our case again," Gahatraj said. "We also want the trust to suspend the demolition drive till we are given our own land. If there's no result, we will internationalize our case by taking our problem to international rights organizations and the United Nations."

As the first such public protest, on Feb. 15 at Maitighar Mandala, one of the most prominent areas of the capital, the Christian community will begin a "relay hunger strike." Christians are also beginning the first-ever Christian census this year to ascertain their true position in society.

"We estimate there are about 2 million Christians now [out of a population of nearly 29 million]," Gahatraj said.

Catholics, however, form a tiny fraction of the Christian community. Satyal assessed there were about 7,500 Catholics. In 2009, three women were killed at the Assumption Church when a militant underground organization planted a bomb there. All three had to be cremated.

"Land is a premium commodity in Kathmandu Valley," said Anthony Sharma, Nepal's first Catholic bishop. "When the living don't have land, it is futile to seek land for the dead. We have accepted cremation for Catholics in Nepal in keeping with acceptance worldwide."

But even the cremation is dogged by discrimination.

"The Arya Ghat cremation ground at Pashupatinath distinguishes between upper castes and lower castes," the bishop said. "If Christians are taken there, they would be treated as lower castes. So we have organized our own cremation site in Teku [in a different part of the town]."

Madhav Kumar Nepal, who resigned as prime minister on June 30 but leads a caretaker government, was regarded as having a soft spot for Christians. After the attack on the Assumption church, he was among the first state officials to visit the injured in the hospital and kept his promise to bring the culprits to justice, with police managing to arrest the blast mastermind.

Nepal resigned last year under pressure by the largest opposition party, and since then the turbulent republic has remained under a powerless caretaker government, unable to make any major decision.

With the squabbling political parties unable to form a new government and a political deadlock spilling into its seventh month, there are now new fears about the prospective constitution, which is expected to consolidate the secular nature of the nation. The constitution was to have been completed last year, but as the bickering parties failed to accomplish the task, the deadline was extended to May 28.

The delay has enabled a spurt in activities of Hindus calling for the restoration of Hinduism as the state religion. If Nepal's May deadline fails as well, Christians fear it could be impossible to obtain their own official burial site.
