

PBI Nepal Field Update

Written by Andrew Miller, PBI Nepal Project Committee Member

Kathmandu, late July 2005 - The last month has been a whirlwind. Over the course of 27 days, my PBI colleague, Jenny Brav, and I have visited nearly a third of Nepal's 75 districts. Our trip was unprecedented: A nation-wide field survey of the security situation facing the country's embattled human rights defenders. The space for such activists has clearly diminished in recent years, squeezed by the Maoist insurgents on one side and the state security forces on the other.

Following the 1 February "royal move," in which parliament was formally abolished and civil rights suspended, sections of the international community responded with grave concern for political party members, journalists, and other social activists. The International Commission of Jurists launched a short-term emergency initiative to provide protection for human rights workers. PBI was invited to facilitate its unique security trainings for defenders, built on twenty-two years of conflict-zone experience.

Marie Caraj, PBI veteran and staff of the PBI European Office, led a series of three-day workshops in late April and early May. Roughly 100 defenders and journalists participated in four of Nepal's five regions. The trainings offered a series of practical and immediate tactics that can help improve security. More broadly, the PBI security methodology focuses on analysis of the threats, security planning, and different kinds of relationship-building as fundamental strategies human rights defenders can implement themselves.

One month after the trainings, Jenny and I were dispatched to visit these defenders in their home towns. Our primary mission was to assess the real impact of the training on their security consciousness and practices. During our travels, we met with members of well-known Nepali human rights groups, several of which are the original requesting organizations for PBI's presence.

We interviewed one charismatic activist with the Human Rights Organization of Nepal. He was tortured by the military late last year. More recently, he received a personalized death-threat, on national television, by the leader of one of the private "village defense committees" that have been accused of violence since earlier this year. Elsewhere we heard from lawyers with Advocacy Forum who are monitoring prison conditions and filing Habeas Corpus petitions against illegal detentions. Each detainee released means more potential threats from authorities. In other districts, we connected with the intrepid human rights investigators of Informal Sector Service Centre, or Insec.

Beyond the big-name groups, we made an effort to meet with other activists and to receive a broader perspective. Several dalit ("untouchable" caste) rights organizations told us about their efforts to eliminate caste-based discrimination and violence. Women's rights activists outlined their activities, including human rights training for village level women's committees and legal action against domestic violence. Organizations representing different ethnic groups, such as the Tharu and Magar peoples, described how they are struggling for cultural and economic equality. Dalit and ethnic groups repeatedly told us that their constituencies are regularly suspected of being Maoists, and consequently harassed, tortured, and killed.

Security problems for human rights defenders are by no means limited to aggressions carried out by the state security apparatus. One ethnic rights organization we visited, Backwards Society Education, has seen its field offices bombed four times by the Maoists. Nepali non-governmental organizations are increasingly accused by the insurgents of being

"agents of imperialism," a reference to the international funding that many receive. Maoist abductions and occasional killings of NGO workers and journalists have added to the generalized climate of fear.

The PBI trainings have clearly contributed to an emerging security consciousness within the human rights movement. In some cases, participants outlined specific security measures they had adopted in recent weeks, such as carrying out fact-finding missions in groups, as opposed to alone. In other cases, they told us that the trainings had boosted their self-confidence and a sense of identity as a Human Rights Defender.

Not all feedback was glowing. For some participants, the training appears to have lacked relevance. Others seem to have been more interested in the personal and professional status associated with having received another certification. These cases notwithstanding, we concluded that a strong demand exists for PBI security trainings and other services. This appears to be especially true in more remote districts where human rights defenders feel isolated and, consequently, particularly vulnerable to harassment, threat, abduction, or attack.

Everywhere we went, Nepali activists expounded on the value of international solidarity. We heard dozens of examples in which international opinion or presence influenced the decisions of both the Maoist rebels and Nepali Royal Army, in favor of releasing captives or not killing them. ICRC visits, for example, were credited with saving the lives of detainees on many occasions. As such, Nepali activists continue to request Peace Brigades International's presence in an unambiguous and widespread fashion.

Legally, entry into the country will be tricky. How to obtain official registration and work visas - under conditions acceptable to PBI - continues to be a conundrum. While we investigate and strategize on this front, we plan to carry out other initial programs. Follow-up on the security trainings will be one area. International delegations could be another. Creative options for "long-distance accompaniment" might also emerge.

Much to the detriment of most Nepalis, the country's violent conflict is not on the verge of simply going away. With our third mission in less than a year, however, we hope to have proven that neither is PBI.

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