

**PRESS CONFERENCE BY SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL IN NEPAL****23 January 2008**

There were optimistic signs that the twice-postponed elections for a Constituent Assembly that would decide the future of Nepal could take place as planned on 10 April, Ian Martin, the Secretary-General's Special Representative said at Headquarters today.

Speaking at a press conference following the Security Council's decision to extend the mandate of the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) for another six months, Mr. Martin said the political leaders of the country's Seven-Party Alliance had shown a capacity for dialogue throughout the political standoff. Moreover, the people of Nepal had a deep desire for peace, democracy and change.

The Special Representative, who also heads UNMIN, said the hope had been that, by creating a free and fair atmosphere for the holding of the elections, the Mission could have accomplished its original mandate within the foreseen 12 months. Like all peace processes, however, the one in Nepal had seen its share of ups and downs. Unrealistic expectations might have been created by the speed with which the mainstream political parties and the Maoists had moved after the signing of the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

With the second postponement of the elections in October 2007, it had become clear that there was mutual mistrust due to the failure by both sides to implement their commitments, he said. Encouraged by UNMIN to be frank with each other, leaders on both sides had indeed confronted the issues, resulting in a new election date and a 23-point agreement.

However, that agreement had not satisfied the Madhesis, Janajatis and Dalits, and other marginalized groups, he said. Political leaders were now trying to find an acceptable balance between ensuring inclusion and representation in the election, and not prejudging the prerogatives of the Constituent Assembly. The central challenge until the April elections was to address the concerns of marginalized groups through dialogue in order to reach agreement on participation in the Constituent Assembly and to address the security situation in Central and Eastern Terai.

Mr. Martin said that, in order to complete UNMIN's main task of assisting with the country's elections, it was essential to find a long-term solution to the management of arms and armies. One of UNMIN's core tasks was monitoring the Maoists' cantonment and weapons storage sites, in addition to the restriction to barracks of the Nepal Army. Having completed the verification of those in the cantonment sites, the Mission's immediate task was now to discharge fighters found to be ineligible to remain, especially those under 18 years as of 25 May 2006, when the ceasefire had gone into effect. A long-term task was to decide the future of those who remained after verification. The Government had reactivated a special committee in that regard.

Asked whether elections could be postponed due to the influence of marginalized groups, Mr. Martin stressed the importance of addressing the issues effectively. The security situation in districts of Central and Eastern Terai was not conducive to elections, as armed groups had carried out killings and abductions. While the Government had responded with security measures, it was not just a matter of policing, but also of establishing a political context in which the great majority of marginalized groups would want to participate in the elections. The Government had reached an earlier agreement in the Terai region, but it had not been accepted fully, and a fresh dialogue was now sought.

Not wishing to speculate on a possible third postponement, he said that whether the elections could take place in a peaceful climate depended on the extent to which the issues were addressed constructively. However, time was short and there were deadlines to meet with the respect to the filing of candidates. It must be clear by those dates that all political groups planned to participate in the elections.

Asked about delays in adopting today's Council resolution, he said the Council had expressed support for UNMIN during consultations on Friday, when he had briefed members. The resolution had been adopted unanimously, but "fine-print negotiations" on any resolution were normal.

In response to another question, he said the incident about which the Indian and Nepalese Governments had complained regarding United Nations personnel meeting Nepalese in India had stemmed from the fact that humanitarian personnel of the Organization had contacted certain groups during the flooding emergencies. That context was now well understood by both Governments.

As for a report on the taxing of schools, teachers and the education system, he said it referred to the period of armed conflict, adding that, in the one-and-a half years since the end of armed conflict, not a single shot had been fired by either side and there had been no serious incidents. That said a lot about the discipline within the two armies, but also about the arms-monitoring mechanism.

There were indeed child protection issues, but they had more to do with youths under the age of 18 years who had been discharged from the Maoist cantonment sites, he said. There had been major interaction between UNMIN, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) regarding child soldiers in the context of verifying those who were under 18 on 25 May 2006. UNICEF had been preparing to assist in the reintegration of those discharged and the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict was planning to visit Nepal in February. A very high proportion of those found to be underage had mostly been recruited during the establishment of the cantonment sites in late 2006, and they had not participated in actual combat.

Asked about the impact of the situation on tourism, he said that industry was of the utmost importance, adding that 2007 had seen the largest number of tourists ever. Even during the armed conflict, tourists had not been targeted.

Responding to a question about recent demonstrations over rising fuel prices, he explained that the oil corporation that imported fuel had run a major deficit and the Government had been considering increases for some time. That had provoked a strong response, which had caused the Government to decide against going ahead with the announced increases. UNMIN saw no significant connection between that and the election.