

The Bhutan REVIEW

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GOONGDA WOOLA DISCONTINUED

The Royal Government has announced the discontinuation of compulsory labour conscription under the system of *goongda woola* from 1996. Each household was required to contribute 15 man days of labour under this system adopted in 1988.

Labour conscription, common in any feudal society, has been in force in different forms throughout Bhutanese history. At its most oppressive, during the 1960s, people were required to contribute one person for one month of labour on rotation basis for every 3 adults (17 to 55 years); this meant that one member in a family of three would be conscripted to work continuously throughout the year. This was the period when Bhutanese first witnessed forced migration, as people, especially from the south and east, unable to both fulfil labour obligations and tend the land, were forced to migrate out of the country.

Although the compulsory form of labour conscription has been phased out - quite likely in response to concerns expressed

GEDU PLYWOOD FACTORY SHUT DOWN

In a deal touted as a "swap for nature", the Royal Government of Bhutan managed to obtain a US\$ 4.039 million grant from the Netherlands government to close down the Gedu Wood Manufacturing Corporation (GWMC). The grant will be used by the Royal Government to pay off outstanding loans to the Kuwaiti Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) and the Bank of Bhutan.

GWMC was established as a fully government-owned enterprise in 1982 through a loan from KFAED and a substantial grant contribution from United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Despite definite knowledge about the project's non-viability - many Forestry officials openly questioned the validity of the projected stock of available timber - the enterprise was pushed through by officials with vested interests. Not unexpectedly, the project was beset by problems from the very beginning. The factory mostly operated at less than 15 per cent of its capacity, al-

WFP TO CONTINUE ASSISTANCE

World Food Programme (WFP), the food aid arm of the United Nations recently announced additional assistance to Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. WFP Country Director Quazi H. Haque and Nepalese Foreign Secretary K.B. Shrestha signed an agreement in Kathmandu on December 10, 1995. Jens Schuthes, the Regional Director of WFP was also present on the occasion.

Under the agreement, WFP will provide 29,751 metric tons of rice, 3,942 tons of pulses, 1,696 tons of vegetable oil, 1,393 tons of sugar and 3,048 tons of blended food. The food aid valued at US\$ 16.3 million will meet the needs of 90,000 refugees in the eight UNHCR administered camps in eastern Nepal for a period of two years starting from December 1, by some governments, notably the United States - various other forms of free "voluntary" labour contributions, including *zhabto lemi*, still remain.

though during monitoring visits by representatives of KFAED and UNDP, the plant operated at full capacity for a day or two through raw material stocks collected over months for such occasions.

Despite the enterprise's failure to earn enough to cover even the operating costs, additional investments were inexplicably made for a massive joinery unit. The entire operations were dependent on expensive captive power generated on the premises.

In a "wise" move the plant was privatized in 1990 just as grid power at one-twentieth the cost of captive power became available to the factory and when the government Corporation, utilizing government resources, had finally succeeded in establishing a network of forest roads for easier extraction of raw material from the difficult terrain. Perhaps it was only coincidental that the new "owners" happened to be the new royal family. Money was not a major factor as the

1995. Supplementary food will also be provided to 7,200 people identified as vulnerable to malnutrition.

The distribution of basic food commodities is done by the Nepal Red Cross Society and the supplementary food by Save the Children Fund (SCF/UK).

Out of the total assistance, 1,500 tons of rice is earmarked for food-for-work programmes involving local communities and refugees, and is aimed to benefit the local people in the vicinity of the Bhutanese refugee camps. His Majesty's Government of Nepal has also agreed to contribute US\$200,000.

In another development, clarifying reports appearing in the local Nepalese media, the United Nations High Commis-

sioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Kathmandu denied there would be a major cut in the assistance to Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. Commenting on the issue, a UNHCR spokesman is quoted as saying "UNHCR believes that existing levels of assistance in the camps are appropriate and should be maintained." "We are confident that the assistance operation will be adequately funded through the end of 1996," the spokesperson further added.

While some adjustments might need to be made in future as a result of emergencies in other parts of the world putting additional pressure on the UNHCR, the refugee agency does not foresee a drastic change in the present level of assistance to Bhutanese refugees in Nepal.

DNC CALLS FOR A DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED GOVERNMENT

The Druk National Congress (DNC) organized a Press Conference in New Delhi on December 14, 1995. Coincidentally, Bhutanese Foreign Minister Dawa Tsering also happened to be in the Indian capital attending the meeting of SAARC Foreign Ministers commemorating 10 years of the Association. The DNC Press Conference addressed by party Chairman Rongthong Kunley Dorji was well attended.

Stating that the media shoulders "the responsibility of protecting each and every individual's right to information - the right to the truth", the Party highlighted the actual state of affairs in Bhutan. "Inside that cocoon of a fantasy kingdom, is the stark reality: a nation of oppressed people living in terror. Cheated of what is rightfully theirs, bereft of that basic human dignity, and yet unable to

express their pain for fear of dire consequences", said the DNC Chairman. He also said that "voices raised in protest, or just to beg for a better life is stifled so ruthlessly and violently that its not just the protesters who are imprisoned, tortured and murdered, even their families, next of kin and friends are victimised in similar fashion."

Highlighting one of the age old problems in the country, Kunley Dorji said that the "people are still compelled to conscript for forced labour" and further added that "even children are not spared and defaulters are fined or imprisoned, or both."

The DNC Chairman also spoke about the little-known problem of Bhutanese refugees in India particularly in the eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh and in Nepal and aptly summarized the situa-

REVIEW MARKS THREE YEARS

This issue of *The Bhutan Review* marks the completion of three years of regular publication. Strange as it may seem, *Review* is the only regular Bhutanese publication apart from the Government controlled weekly *Kuensel* published in Thimphu.

Three years ago, we published the first issue of the *Review* with the express objective of moulding the paper to become a platform of constructive dissent. In our continuing struggle for democratic reforms and fundamental freedoms in Bhutan, we hope that it has progressed towards becoming the representative voice of all dissidents, within and outside Bhutan. In the days ahead, we look forward to the continued interest and support of all our readers.

tion inside the country thus: "Few though, have knowledge of the rest who silently suffer within."

During the course of interaction with the media, the party also highlighted efforts made by the Royal Government to project the current crisis as an ethnic problem. The DNC Chairman said that this was a strategy of the government to divert people's attention. He attributed the "peace and harmony among the Bhutanese people" belonging to different ethnic groups as the "strongest feature of our nationhood."

While protesting the tyrannical attitude of the regime, the DNC called upon the Royal Government to respect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in its totality and emphasized the need of democratic institutions and a democratically elected government to protect these rights.

Bhutan Urged to Introduce Reforms

In a letter to His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer of India has called for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in Bhutan with due respect for Democracy and Human Rights. "Whatever the past, the future must be moulded to grant stability to the Bhutanese Kingdom by a process of actualisation of human rights by all Bhutanese people, including those living in exile in Nepal and other neighbourhoods", writes Justice Iyer.

New York-based Alliance for Democracy and Human Rights in Nepal (ADHRN) has also written to the Bhutanese King to seek "brave and amicable solutions" and to introduce necessary democratic reforms that will serve to "strengthen the institution of monarchy and bring stability and prosperity to Bhutan."

See LETTERS page 3



The Bhutan REVIEW

'FAMILY' RESURRECTION

A silver statue of Shabdrung Jigme Dorji, the sixth mind incarnation of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, was installed with much fanfare at Talo monastery on November 23. According to *Kuensel*, the ceremony in which the royal family took full part, "will go down as a significant event in Bhutanese history."

Surely there is something amiss.

From the time Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal's legacy of theocratic rule in Bhutan made way for hereditary absolute monarchy in 1907 through an "electoral" process we are now repeatedly told - there has been no dearth of attempts on the part of rulers to fortify and further strengthen their position by drawing upon symbolic elements of the former institution. Since the greater part of political power and authority in theocracy was naturally intrinsically tied to and emanated from religion, in the efforts to enhance its own legitimacy, hereditary monarchy was forced to try and usurp functions of the Shabdrung whom they had ousted. While physical power and authority enabled them to succeed in some instances - allowing hereditary rulers to take on certain roles traditionally reserved in the past for the reincarnate spiritual head - they were not always successful. And although the authority of the monarchs was absolute and their control total, the strong influence of religion in the everyday life of Bhutanese still left rulers with a lurking fear and a sense of insecurity. In the consequent "power struggles", two Shabdrung reincarnates, the sixth in 1931 and the seventh in 1953, were assassinated. The eighth Shabdrung, His Holiness Jigme Ngawang Namgyel was taken into protective custody by the Indian government in 1962 and currently resides in Manali in the northern hill state of Himachal Pradesh in India.

If in the past, successive rulers felt assassinations were necessary to strengthen their political hold, in more recent times the Shabdrung was studiously ignored. The regime, still suffering from self-doubts and insecurity, seldom acknowledged the existence of the Shabdrung and consigned the institution to the obscurity and safety of history books. In fact, as late as in 1985, the government believed it was confronted with a major crisis when many ordinary people as well as government officials in the east went to pay homage to H.H. Shabdrung Jigme Ngawang Namgyel when he paid a brief visit to the border town of Samdrup Jongkhar. Many people were subsequently imprisoned. For receiving *wang* (blessings) from His Holiness, the *Dzongdag* (district administrator) and *Thrimpon* (district magistrate) were themselves arrested and hauled up to the capital. The crisis subsided, and those arrested released, only after the regime convinced itself that people had been drawn to the Shabdrung solely for spiritual and not political reasons.

The relationship between the two "rival" institutions, one real and functioning and one that only continues to cast a perpetual shadow, took a dramatic turn when His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, defying a popular prophecy that allegedly spelled doom for Bhutanese monarchy if the Wangchucks formed an alliance with the family of the Shabdrung, formally married four daughters of Ugen Dorji on October 31, 1988. The Queens are descendants of the sixth Shabdrung.

Since the royal wedding there has been a distinct change in policy on the question of the status of the Shabdrung. That there should be this complete U-turn in the attitude of the regime is quite understandable. In a society where political and religious history are completely intertwined, even with the passage of nearly nine decades since one institution of governance replaced another, there is no doubt in anyone's mind that the Shabdrung's influence remains. But the insecurity that existed over the years as a result of this perceived threat from the former institution has largely been compensated by the external image of stability. With political fortunes once again being tested by the current crisis, the time may have become ripe, so the Royal Government apparently holds, for the regime to make capital out of the Shabdrung's spiritual influence over the people.

This is what the authorities have now set out to accomplish. Without offending either the sensitivity or sensibility of even the most devout and loyal Bhutanese, however, one can surely question the brazen manner in which religious symbols and institutions are being unabashedly appropriated.

The consecration of the statue gifted by His Majesty must surely have warmed the hearts of many people. As an act of atonement, it must have been a spiritually satisfying event for some. For others, it must have been an emotional day to finally see justice done. But, irreverent as it might seem, from a national perspective, especially as His Holiness still remains in exile, it is difficult to see the recent ceremony as "a significant event in Bhutanese history."

If the intent of the Royal Government is to indicate to Bhutanese that there is a willingness on the part of the regime to allow the Shabdrung to take his rightful place, at least as the spiritual if not religiopolitical head, the intentions do not come out clearly enough. What transpires, instead, from the steps taken by the regime since 1988 towards "rehabilitation" of the Shabdrung, is that the sentiments of the people and the institution of the Shabdrung are only being blatantly exploited to resurrect the "family" rather than the institution itself.

THE SHAPE OF THE WORLD

For most people, the world is made up of 185 nation-states, on the current count of the United Nations: some huge, some tiny, some of them democracies, most of them not, but all equal in the eye of the world's law. In fact, a majority of these 185 places are not nation-states in the strict meaning of the term, but survivals of older, cruder forms of political life. Nevertheless, all 185 share two vital characteristics. They each cover separate portions of the earth's surface; and each has a government whose claim to speak for it is recognized by most governments of the other portions of the earth's surface. These are the basic units of geopolitics, the pieces on the international chessboard, the essential components of the fearsome game known as foreign policy.

The trouble is that, over the past half-century or so, these basic units have all, big or small, become less dominant, less independent and, in a way, less separate than they were in their prime. This is because of the arrival in the world of new forces, created by the technological advances of the 20th century, which have the power to move things visible and invisible from one part of the world to another whether any nation-state likes it or not.

... [But] one dreamy successor to the nation-state is certainly not going to happen. The disappearance of communism has not opened the door to the emergence of a one-world system...

Free-market democracy won that fight, but free-market democracy is in turn now challenged by two self-proclaimed rivals. One part of the back-to-basics movement that is sweeping the Muslim world seems to accept the free-market bit, but believes that democracy is a denial of the principle that God decides what should happen in the world. And East Asian politicians who talk about "Asian values", though they say they accept democracy, want to run it like a family - with themselves, naturally, as the firm but kindly father - so that it does not succumb to the anarchy they think is caused by too much western individualism.

It is not yet clear whether either of these challenges to the West's picture of the future will endure. The Muslim one is already under attack from more open-minded Islamic revivalists, who insist that there should be a democratic way of deciding what God wants for the world. Advocates of Asian values may come to be judged, by their fellow Asians, as just a bunch of politicians trying to hold on to the pleasures of power. But for now it is plain that arguments of ideology are still helping to shape the world. They pull people into rival camps, and give them more precise reasons for disagreeing with each other than the mere fact of belonging to different "civilisations"

Unfortunately, ideologies suffer from exactly the same difficulty as culture-zones when they

offer themselves as substitute for the nation-state. Nobody seems to want to join the proposed substitute.

The proponents of Asian values happily go on working inside their existing countries, because that is where they wield the authority they want to preserve. The Islamic anti-democrats in various Muslim countries have made no progress in breaking down the frontiers between those countries; indeed, they do not even seem to talk to each other very much. And, when the communist ideology collapsed, it became painfully clear that its component parts had been kept together by mere force, not by the vigour of an idea.

...It was little more than 200 years ago, a blink of history's eye, that men invented the nation-state as a better way of organising the business of government than any previously available. Before that, the state - a recognisable chunk of territory, recognisably under somebody's control - had generally been one or the other of two things. Call them the brute-force state and the justification-by-good-works state.

A brute-force state came into existence when some tough took power by strength of arms and stayed in power by killing or otherwise silencing those who objected. That was how government began in most places, and the species is by no means extinct. You could hardly have a better example of such a state than Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

The trouble with relying on brute force, though, is that however ruthless the ruler may be there will in the end usually be somebody angry and desperate enough to put a sword or bullet through him. This most primitive form of state-system therefore evolved, except in the unluckiest places, into one of those in which those who controlled power sought to justify their control of it. The rulers did not ask the rule for their consent to being ruled. But they did try to keep them happy - or just happy enough by providing for some of their essential needs.

In the arid empires of the Old Testament world, from Babylon to Persia, one essential need was the provision of a reliable flow of water. Later the Romans, having built their empire by force, sought to justify it by providing the rule of law and a sense of order (the British did much the same in India 1,800 years later). By the Middle Ages, the implicit bargain between governors and governed had become a complicated network of mutual obligations between king, barons and the lower orders.

It was not perfect, but it was better than plain thuggery or chaos. Even now, the world contains many examples of this second system. The Chinese government still seeks to justify its one-party grip on power by a claim to have produced order and good

economic statistics; so, less convincingly, do the rulers of assorted Arab countries.

What this system still lacks, of course, is any organic link between government and people. Even the most conscientious prince of the pre-nation-state era assumed power by right of inheritance, not by the will of those governed. "I am the state," said Louis XIV, the most *de-haut-en-bas* specimen of the old order. A century later, the inventors of the nation-state set out to provide an alternative to the lofty arrogance of his first person singular. As they saw it, a government should be able to say: "The state gives us our authority."

A nation-state is a place where people feel a natural connection with each other because they share a language, a religion, or something else strong enough to bind them together and make them different from others: "we", not "they". The nation-state is the politics of the first person plural. Its government can speak for its people because it is part of the "we". It emerges out of the nation.

There can be arguments about how the government does its emerging, by election or by some more obscure process. At many times in the 200-year history of the nation-state ambitious or obsessed men - Hitler was the worst of all - have claimed the right to power because they said they knew better than anybody else what their nation wanted. But even they were different from Louis XIV. They claimed their authority, truthfully or not, from the will of their people. One way or another, in the past couple of centuries the connection between people and government has become organic. The concept of nation-state shakes hands with the concept of government by consent.

The sense of being "we" can come from a shared language, as it unitingly does in most European countries, but divisively in places like Quebec; or from a shared religion, as in Ireland or Pakistan; or from the proud ownership of some special political idea, such as direct democracy in four-language Switzerland or the "American idea" in the multi-ethnic United States; or from the memory of a shared horror, as in Israel. Sometime it comes from a mixture of these things. The hatreds of Bosnia are rooted both in differences of religion and in the memories of long-ago frontier wars between different culture-areas.

However it comes about, it is the necessary foundation for any durable political system. No government, unless it is prepared to rely entirely on brute force, can do its job properly in the modern world if the people it governs do not have a clear-cut sense of identity that they share with the government - unless, in other words, they are both a part of the "we".

The Economist, Dec 23 1995 - Jan 5 1996.

LETTERS TO HIS MAJESTY

Among numerous representatives of governments and agencies as well as individuals who have written directly to His Majesty the King over the past few years to express their concern over the political situation in Bhutan and to urge the monarch to take the steps necessary to resolve the problem, the *Review* has received copies of two letters written this December, one from India and the other from the United States, which addresses the issues involved in some detail.

V.R. Krishna Iyer, former Justice of the Supreme Court of India and currently patron of Bhutan Solidarity Group in India, wrote to His Majesty from his home in Cochin, Kerala, on December 19. Along with a small group of other rights activists in India, Justice Iyer has followed closely the developments in the Bhutanese crisis, and is aware of the various issues involved. Having visited the refugee camps, and having met dissidents as well as representatives of the Royal Government of Bhutan in New Delhi, Justice Iyer has firsthand information. As a member of a People's SAARC Jurists' Mission in 1992, however, he was denied a visa to visit Bhutan.

ERNAKULAM, COCHIN
19th December, 1995

May It Please Your Majesty,

The New World Order desiderates a democratic system which is the political expression of our common heritage around the globe. In the message of the UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, there is a pregnant statement that democratisation must be a goal of the international community. Democracy is for everyone. And like Human Rights, Democracy has a universal dimension. So democracy and human rights are goals which are indissolubly linked and which must be pursued together the world over.

I commend this message of Operation Democratisation to Your Majesty, as any other system will be violative of human rights and the rule of law. It behoves your Government, therefore, to adopt Constitutional Monarchy with profound respect for Democracy and Human Rights.

In this background, I emphasize the fact that a large number of Bhutan citizenry have the grievance that neither democracy nor human rights is available in your State. Wisdom and statesmanship, as history teaches, is not to resist people's legitimate aspirations but to accede to their cherished wishes. May I urge the Royal Government of Bhutan to release Mr. Tek Nath Rizal, the founding father of the Bhutanese Human Rights Movement, and to resolve the human rights crisis in your country? Only a national reconciliation and a humane solution of the Bhutanese Refugee problem can win stability for your Government.

I need not go into the details of the turbulence and narration of violation of human rights, especially in South Bhutan. Forcible exile and other injustices have been reported by many sources to me. The Amnesty International also has been critical of the human rights condition in your monarchy. The Bhutan-Nepal Committee, with its many rounds of talks, has not produced any accord. The humanitarian dimension to this issue is of deep concern for everyone within and without your country. The restoration of fundamental human rights in Bhutan and the speedy rehabilitation of the Bhutanese refugees by creating propitious conditions for such returns are urgent imperatives. To drive people to despair is to invite extremist action and terrorist development which does nobody any good.

I appeal to Your Majesty, as one concerned with human rights and humanitarian law, as a friend of the Bhutanese people and well-wisher of your Himalayan Kingdom, and as the President of Indian Centre for Humanitarian Laws and Research (ICHLAR), to take up the matter of Democracy in Bhutan seriously and use the good offices of well meaning groups and individuals within and without your country to help heal the current bitterness and restore the right of common people to live in peace as good Bhutanese subjects clothed with democratic rights.

I may assure Your Majesty that I write this letter full of hope that, whatever the past, the future must be moulded to grant stability to the Bhutanese Kingdom by a process of actualisation of human rights by all Bhutanese people, including those now living in exile in Nepal and other neighbourhoods.

With humanitarian hopes and profound regards,
Yours most sincerely,

(V.R. KRISHNA IYER)

NEW YORK
1 December 1995

Your Majesty,

We wish to congratulate the Government of Bhutan on the occasion of Bhutan's election to chair the Third Committee of the United Nations Fiftieth General Assembly session. The increasing role of small developing countries in the global issues underscores the importance of combined efforts of all states, large and small, in the resolution of conflicts facing the world today. While Bhutan presides over the deliberations of the Third Committee, which deals, among other issues, with the global human rights and refugee questions, we wish to draw Your Majesty's attention to the issue of nearly 100,000 Bhutanese people who are currently living in UNHCR-administered refugee camps in eastern Nepal.

Your Majesty, human rights violations and the absence of democratic institutions that guarantee those rights are the root causes of internal conflicts that are responsible for creating over 20 million refugees in the world today. Towards a permanent solution to the problem, the international community unequivocally emphasizes, at various United Nations forums, the importance of removing those causes of conflicts. The world knows that Bhutan is a multi-ethnic nation with more than one language, culture and traditions. The

policy of the Government of Bhutan to enforce ethnic homogeneity by suppressing language, culture and traditions of one community in order to promote those of another, is solely responsible for creating the current conflict in Bhutan. The international community is aware that Bhutan lacks any popular democratic institutions that guarantee human rights and fundamental freedoms of all her people. Your Majesty, Bhutan's identity as a nation state will be further enhanced in the international community of nations under your benevolent reign if the government's policies are equal and fair to all Bhutanese citizens.

... Your Majesty, the long-term interest for Bhutan lies not in avoiding or postponing problems; it lies in finding brave and amicable solutions to current problems, and in developing democratic institutions that guarantee human rights and fundamental freedoms to all of Your Majesty's subjects. The need for necessary democratic reforms in Bhutan voiced by various political parties such as Druk National Congress, Bhutan National Democratic Party and others, should not be ignored for the long-term interest of Bhutan. It is only through instituting democratic reforms that the harmony, stability and prosperity of small developing nations are best guaranteed. The destiny of a nation is molded by the desire of all her people. Your Majesty, it is in Your Royal wish to fulfill the desire of all Bhutanese people to bring about necessary democratic reforms in Bhutan. Such reforms will strengthen the institution of monarchy and bring stability and prosperity to Bhutan.

Your Majesty, Nepal and Bhutan are traditional friendly countries which share same geo-political and economic constraints. The interest of Nepal lies not in meddling with the internal affairs of a friendly neighbour but in helping it resolve its problem. The interest of Nepal also lies in returning those refugees to where they came from, not in prolonging their stay in Nepal.

We sincerely appeal to Your Majesty,

(Dr. Kamal Pande)

COORDINATOR, BHUTANESE
REFUGEE ISSUES

Dr. Kamal Pande former President of New York-based Alliance for Democracy and Human Rights in Nepal (ADHRN) is currently ADHRN Coordinator for Bhutanese Refugee Issues. He has been concerned about the plight of Bhutanese refugees ever since the first refugees arrived on Nepalese soil. He has involved himself in all the programmes organized over the years to highlight the Bhutanese crisis in the United States. The Alliance is concerned by the lack of progress in talks between Bhutan and Nepal since the consequent delays does not bode well for Nepal, and is particularly perturbed by the lethargy in Kathmandu. It is anxious to see the Nepalese government push ahead with more proactive policies before Nepal's interests are seriously undermined by the continued presence of the large refugee population.

"IN QUOTES"

"Until individual governments ratify existing human rights treaties and fully implement their provisions and until the international community creates a compulsory jurisdiction within which those who violate human rights can be held accountable, written human rights guarantees, for many citizens of the world, will be as real as fairy tales."

Jan Bauer, Human Rights consultant and UN representative for Article 19, in *Human Rights Tribune*, Oct/Nov 1995.

"I said that it has been my experience, in a lifetime of studying repressive societies, that dictators often delude themselves into believing they have popular support, but that people often smile not because they are happy, but because they are afraid."

Madeline Albright, US Ambassador to the UN, at a news conference in Rangoon, Burma.

MEDIA SCAN

SARO-WIWA DEATH "POLITICAL MURDER"

On November 10, at 11.30 a.m., in a prison in the eastern city of Port Harcourt, Ken Saro-Wiwa, one of Nigeria's leading human rights defenders, environmentalists, and writers, was hanged with eight other activists. This brutal act can only be described as political murder.

The nine had been arrested and accused in the killing of four pro-military traditional leaders. They were condemned to death on October 31 after a kangaroo trial before a military tribunal. Amnesty International described the trials as politically-motivated and unfair. Ken Saro-Wiwa's lawyers, themselves human rights defenders, abandoned the case earlier this year saying the verdict was [reordained and that there was no justice before such a body. "I was found guilty even before I was tried," Saro-Wiwa said at his sentencing.

Ken Saro-Wiwa, 54, was the head of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). The Ogoni are an ethnic community of 500,000, whose traditional homeland is the oil-rich swamplands of Nigeria's Delta State. While their farmland has been devastated by oil-spills, the Ogoni have had no share in the wealth that this oil has brought to the Nigerian elite. When they tried to campaign peacefully for their rights, they were met with state terror.

"The crime of the Ogoni people," wrote Ken Saro-Wiwa in his opening statement, "is that they have the temerity to ask their rights from both the Government of Nigeria and from Shell."

Human rights activists and government leaders alike were stunned. Few believed that the military regime of General Sani Abacha would have the gall to carry out the executions after thousands of appeals for clemency and in the midst of the meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of State and Government in New Zealand.

The Nigerian government's flagrant and callous disregard for human rights has been documented in this, and earlier issues of the *Tribune*. In the February/March 1995 edition, we carried a plea from Nigeria's Campaign for Democracy, for NGOs to mobilize their governments to act before it is too late, before Nigeria disintegrates into civil war.

But obviously, Nigeria's military leaders have become as inured to international public condemnation as they have become indifferent to international human rights norms.

The reluctance of governments to act was clearly demonstrated last year at the UN Commission on Human Rights when an effort to get a resolution passed condemning Nigeria's human rights record was blocked by African governments who closed ranks behind one of their own. This time, however, Nigeria's military regime had gone too far even for regional solidarity.

The death of Saro-Wiwa finally shocked governments into action. President Nelson Mandela of South Africa, who had been advocating for quiet diplomacy, called for Nigeria's expulsion from the Commonwealth and a flood of other condemnations were announced from African States, including Zimbabwe. Only The Gambia, also under military rule, failed to support the initiative.

...The death of Ken Saro-Wiwa demonstrates, yet again, the grave peril that many human rights defenders face in their struggle for a more just society. In too many countries human rights advocates and organizations confront governments which use all forms of sophisticated (and sometimes crude) techniques to threaten, harass or undermine their work.

Laurie S. Wiseberg, *Human Rights Tribune*, Oct/Nov 1995

1995 - The Year in Review

JANUARY: Brigid Mayes of the Bhutan Support Group in Ireland visits refugee camps to obtain first-hand information about the situation and also to help select candidates from among refugees involved in the education sector to visit Ireland.

Representative of UNHCR in Nepal Tahir Ali visits Jhapa and speaks separately with representatives of refugees in each camp. He also meets representatives of the dissident community.

Bhutanese refugee women organize a peaceful rally at Birtamod on January 13 to sensitize the international donor community prior to the January 17 Round Table Meeting (RTM).

55 donor governments and agencies meet in Geneva, Switzerland, and discuss assistance to Bhutan. The question of human rights figures prominently in the delegates' statements.

Officials from the U.S. State Department and U.S. embassies in Kathmandu and New Delhi visit the camps and meet with representatives of the refugee community.

FEBRUARY: Six frontline dissident organizations, Bhutan Peoples Party (BPP), Bhutan National Democratic Party (BNDP), Druk National Congress (DNC), Human Rights Organization of Bhutan (HUROB), Association of Human Rights Activists (AHURA) and Students Union of Bhutan (SUB) meet informally for the first time in efforts to create a united platform.

Seminar "Bhutan Refugees: An Unresolved Crisis" is held in New York's Columbia University. Organized by the university's Centre for Human Rights and the Southern Asian Institute, School of International and Public Affairs, in cooperation with the Alliance for Democracy and Human Rights in Nepal, the conference brings together 140 individuals concerned about the Bhutanese problem. Besides human rights organizations, the U.S. State Department and many organs of the UN are represented. Bhim Subba, Executive Member of HUROB represents Bhutanese dissidents.

The Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 1994, an annual publication of the U.S. State Department, is submitted to the Senate and House of Representatives. The report continues to express concern over the human rights situation in Bhutan and the consequent problem of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal.

The diplomatic community makes a one-day visit to Khudunabari camp. The group includes non-resident diplomats accredited to Nepal who come from embassies in New Delhi.

The Bhutan-Nepal bilateral talks, on hold for eight months because of a political crisis and change of government in Nepal, is finally scheduled. The Bhutanese delegation led by Home Minister Dago Tshering arrives in Kathmandu on February 27 for the fifth round of talks. Nepal presents new team under Home Minister K.P. Sharma Oli.

MARCH: The Joint Ministerial Committee meeting between Bhutan and Nepal ends on March 2 without agreement. The two governments agree to meet again in April.

Ms O'Keefe, Australian Ambassador to the Kingdom of Nepal and Carol Long, UNDP Resident

Representative to Nepal, visit Timai and Beldangi camps along with Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) officials.

A team from Bhutan Solidarity Group (India) arrives to study the refugee situation and to investigate allegations of repression of southern Bhutanese by the Royal Government of Bhutan. They visit camps, interview hundreds of refugees and inspect their documents. They also meet dissident groups. The study team travels to the Indo-Bhutan border areas and inspects evidence of homes destroyed by Bhutanese authorities.

On her maiden tour of South Asian countries, U.S. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton arrives in Kathmandu. All Bhutanese Refugee Women's Association (ABRWA) submits an appeal.

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention presents its report on the group's October 1994 visit to Bhutan before the 51st Session of the Commission on Human Rights. Human rights groups protest the arbitrary nature of the findings of the team.

APRIL: Tim Wirth, the leader of the U.S. delegation to the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna and currently Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs, becomes the highest ranking U.S. Government official to visit Bhutan. He is accompanied by the American Ambassador to India Frank Wisner and other officials. The issue of human rights is raised by the visitors during their audience with His Majesty and other Royal Government officials.

The sixth round of bilateral talks in Thimphu (April 17-20) ends in a deadlock. For the first time, the Royal Government announces that talks have failed. Thimphu lays the blame on Nepal and alleges that the Nepalese delegation introduced "new elements" and proposed fresh unacceptable conditions. Bhutanese Home Minister Dago Tshering alleges that Nepal insists that Bhutan take back all the people in the camps regardless of whether they are Bhutanese or not. But Nepalese Home Minister K.P. Sharma Oli tells Bhutan Broadcasting Service, the Kingdom's only radio station, that Bhutan "should take back refugees who are Bhutanese citizens..."

MAY: New Delhi-based Deputy Regional Delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Marc Flegenheimer visits the refugee camps and meets dissident groups in Damak.

Bradman Weerakoon, former Presidential Adviser for International Affairs of Sri Lanka, and Niaz Naik, former Pakistani Foreign Secretary, visit the refugee camps. The two are part of South Asia Initiative, a group of former senior bureaucrats of the SAARC countries who hope to contribute towards conflict resolution efforts in the region.

P.V. Manohar Rao, brother of Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and Yugal Sharma of Rao's Congress Party visit Goldhap and Beldangi refugee camps. They address a gathering at Beldangi and meet dissident leaders.

Representatives of dissident groups call on the Deputy Prime

Minister of Nepal, Madhav Kumar Nepal, in Jhapa. He visits Khudunabari camp.

His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck and Nepalese Prime Minister Man Mohan Adhikari meet at the SAARC Summit in New Delhi. His Majesty reportedly briefs Adhikari on the Royal Government position regarding the resolution of the problem of refugees in camps in eastern Nepal.

His Majesty's Government of Nepal (HMG) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) sign an agreement. HMG will receive NRs 7.235 million for refugee registration, refugee identity cards, and other related activities.

11 Bhutanese human rights activists participate in a 16-day Diplomacy Training Programme in Kathmandu. The training organized by South Asian Forum for Human Rights (SAFHR), is conducted by the University of New South Wales, Australia.

The Druk National Congress (DNC) successfully carries out a nationwide poster campaign. Posters protesting the lack of fundamental rights appear all over the country on the morning of May 28.

JUNE: Frontline dissident groups meeting regularly to forge a common platform finally agree to announce the formation of the Bhutanese Coalition for Democratic Reforms (BCDR). Om Dhungel, General Secretary of HUROB, is declared the spokesperson.

A Hercules transport aircraft arrives in Kathmandu bringing medical assistance for Nepal from the United States. The U.S. Embassy in Kathmandu announces that part of the 37 tons of medical equipment is destined for the Bhutanese refugee camps.

A 2-member team from the United Nations Centre for Human Rights visits Bhutan as part of the Centre's Advisory Services programme. On their way to Thimphu, they meet Bhutanese dissident groups in Kathmandu.

The School Leaving Certificate (SLC) examinations conducted by His Majesty's Government of Nepal is announced. 92 of the 113 refugee candidates from the school in Beldangi camp are declared successful. The 81.42% pass percentage compares well with the Nepalese national average of 43%.

JULY: BCDR delegation attends People's SAARC consultative meeting in New Delhi. The team also meets prominent people in the Indian capital and organizes a day-long picket on July 24 to protest the participation of Bhutan's non-elected Speaker and parliamentarians in the SAARC Conference of Speakers and Parliamentarians.

Charles Norchi, Executive Director of New York-based International League for Human Rights meets with representatives of the Bhutanese dissident community in a program organized by the United States Information Centre (USIS) in Kathmandu.

Noble Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi is released after six years of house arrest.

Amnesty International (AI) releases its annual report for 1994. In its entry on Bhutan, AI states

that over a thousand people were forced to flee the country and seek sanctuary in Nepal during the year, and that although general improvement in prison conditions were reported more than 50 southern Bhutanese continued to be held in custody, many for more than three years, without charge or trial.

General Secretaries of HUROB, Dr. Bhampa Rai and Kishore Rai address AI Nepal Section's National Youth Conference on Refugees and Human Rights.

AUGUST: The 73rd Session of the National Assembly of Bhutan finally convenes on August 10, a full two years since the last session (July 8-30, 1993). According to its own rules, the Assembly is required to meet at least twice each year. Except for a special session to insult and abuse DNC Chairman Rongthong Kunley Dorji, there is little to distinguish the orchestrations of the 73rd meeting from past sessions as the same items about *ngolops* (traitors) and terrorists are repeated on the agenda. The calls for not allowing a single person to return to Bhutan is reiterated, contradicting the House resolution to continue bilateral talks with Nepal to resolve the problem of refugees in the camps.

The Bhutan National Democratic Party (BNDP) organizes a mass rally in Siliguri. Thousands of Bhutanese in exile and local sympathizers attend. A number of Indian political figures from the region address the meeting.

Colonel Tandin Dorji, Bhutan's Chief of Police, is sentenced by a military tribunal to 3 years in prison. He is found guilty of seven charges relating to the escape of two "terrorists" from Chemgang prison. Col Dorji is the brother-in-law of dissident leader Rongthong Kunley Dorji of DNC.

A meeting of dissident groups agrees to rename the coalition to Bhutanese Coalition for Democratic Movement (BCDM).

The Nepalese Supreme Court announces its verdict - the dissolution of the parliament by the CPM (UML) government is declared unconstitutional. Parliament is reinstated.

SEPTEMBER: A coalition government of the Nepali Congress (NC), Rashtriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) and Nepal Sadbhavana Party (NSP) is formed. Sher Bahadur Deuba who, as Home Minister in the Koirala government, led the Nepalese delegation in the bilateral talks with Bhutan takes over a Prime Minister.

Bhutanese refugee women take part in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. They stage a rally and hold a workshop.

The formation of Appeal Movement Coordinating Council (AMCC) by some Bhutanese refugees is announced. Declares programme to appeal to His Majesty the King and, failing to receive a response, to launch a march into Bhutan from Nepal.

Steve R. Mann, U.S. State Department Director for India, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, visits the camps along with U.S. Embassy officials and UNHCR Representative in Kathmandu, Tahir Ali. Talks to refugees and dissident groups.

OCTOBER: The United Nations celebrates its 50 years. Heads of States and Governments gather at the organization's headquarter in New York to pay tribute in a special 50th anniversary session of the General Assembly. His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck absents himself and commands Foreign Minister Dawa Tsering to represent Bhutan.

HUROB General Secretary Om Dhungel attends a regional meeting of the People's Plan for the 21st Century (PP21) in Kathmandu.

Druk National Congress (DNC) organizes a Press Conference in Siliguri in India to highlight the dismal human rights situation in Bhutan and the current struggle for democratic reforms in the country.

NOVEMBER: The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) concludes its seventh visit to Bhutan. As on past occasions, the team is granted an audience by His Majesty and meets senior officials as well as prisoners in Chemgang, many of whom have not been charged and brought to trial despite their period in detention crossing five years.

Relief organizations working among Bhutanese refugees in the camps circulate an appeal among the international community to bring pressure to bear on the governments of Nepal and Bhutan to ensure an early just political solution. The Plea for Justice points out that people have the right to nationality and protests the arbitrary deprivation of this right.

The Bhutan Support Group in Ireland in a press release expresses serious concern over the tone of the proceedings of the 73rd National Assembly of Bhutan (Aug 10 - Sep 2) and the "contemptuous dismissal of any form of dissent."

UNHCR releases **The State of the World's Refugees, 1995**. The report reveals UNHCR's resolve to adopt a more proactive approach to "resolve the refugee problem" replacing the traditional reactive strategy which only tried to "solve the problem of refugees."

DECEMBER: The United Nations, its Secretary General and its High Commissioner for Human Rights come under scathing criticism from prominent activist group Human Rights Watch. UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the organization's annual report charges, "grievously failed to uphold" long-standing UN vows to promote human rights and fundamental freedoms. The UN terms the report "irresponsible".

Bhutan is once again flayed as one of the most repressive States by Freedom House in its annual report for 1995.

The World Food Programme (WFP) announces it will continue to provide food assistance valued at US\$ 16.3 million for a further two years from December 1, 1995 to an estimated 90,000 Bhutanese refugees in camps in eastern Nepal. An agreement is signed by the Nepalese Foreign Secretary K.B. Shrestha and WFP Country Director Quazi H. Haque.

The Netherlands bails out Bhutan. Provides funds to close down Gedu plywood factory.