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Youth Speak Out on Community Security in the Eastern Terai

Reflections from Morang and Sunsari Consultations

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**International Alert and Friends for Peace (FFP)
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Introduction

Young people comprise nearly 30% of the overall population of Nepal, yet youth voices have largely been excluded from arenas of debate and decision-making fora. This has resulted in a general failure on the part of the Government to recognise the particular needs and experiences of different groups of young people and reflect these in policy making. Almost 12-years of violent conflict have had a profound effect upon young people in Nepal. Unemployment has increased and the ability of the state to deliver basic services has been significantly weakened. Now facing a lack of educational and economic opportunities, young people are disillusioned, frustrated and angry.

Young people in the eastern Terai, including Morang and Sunsari, have particular, shared experiences of the changing dynamics and impacts of conflict. Ongoing violence in this region has meant that young people in the eastern Terai have yet to experience the benefits of peace and continue to experience the frustrations of living in conflict. Disillusioned youth in this region represent a fertile recruitment ground for new and emerging radicalised groups.¹ Unable to get their voices heard through non-violent means, a growing minority of young people are resorting to violent protest.

This project aims to address the exclusion of youth from forums for dialogue, particularly around the national peace process, by understanding and strengthening youth voices on community security needs and perspectives across different identity lines in Eastern Terai

○ Aims of this paper

This paper aims to summarise the key community security concerns and issues that were voiced by youth and student groups in consultations carried out in Sunsari and Morang districts between the 25th September and the 5th November 2007.² Voluntary ‘Youth Steering Committees’, comprising active and knowledgeable youth stakeholders, have played a key role as

¹ This includes, for example, the Young Communist League and Janatantrik Terai Mukti Morcha,

² This included Satarjhora and Aurabarni VDCs and Inaruwa and Itahari municipalities in Sunsari and Rangeli, Amar Daha and Daieniya VDCs and Biratnagar municipality in Morang

representatives for their district and in steering the project process. Local level interactions were then held in order to understand the particular issues facing rural youth.

This paper is also designed to provide a discussion point for the next phase of the project, in particular an upcoming regional interaction in Biratnagar. At this interaction, youth from each district will be invited to share their perspectives, with the aim of developing a consensus on key community security issues and exploring how these issues might be addressed effectively at the local, regional and national levels.

The paper looks first at the community security issues affecting youth in the two districts, then moves on to explore ways in which respondents felt that the current situation of unrest and insecurity could be changed.

Summary of Findings: Key issues

The community security issues affecting youth in the two project districts can be divided into two areas. The first are the immediate or short-term threats to security, mostly of a physical nature. The second are longer-term ‘obstacles to peace’, which comprise issues underpinning and exacerbating levels of insecurity in the region.

1. Perceived threats to security amongst youth:

- **Armed groups , criminal gangs and the ‘3Ms’**

Many young people expressed concern about the rising levels of insecurity caused by the increasing activity of armed factions and criminal gangs. Participants pointed out that it is often difficult to differentiate between ‘criminals’ and some of the armed factions now operating in the Terai, who claim to be fighting for an autonomous, secessionist, Madhesi state and the rights of the Madhesi people. It was felt that many of these break-away factions lack a clear political ideology or mandate and appear to be economically motivated, with hired ‘goondas’ being controlled by leaders in India.

“The community security situation is bad for all, not just Pahadis. Militias and criminals don’t discriminate between Madhesis and Pahadis – they loot and steal from anyone who has money.”

Motorbikes, money and mobiles (the ‘3Ms’) are the currency of choice for these groups, with looting now a commonplace occurrence in VDCs south of the highway. Many respondents compared the current situation in the Terai with the situation during the ten year Maoist conflict, saying that whereas the Maoists were to some extent ‘controlled’ by their ideology and political mandate, the current Terai-based militia groups are out of control and “kill without listening”.

- **The porous border as a source and refuge for armed and criminal groups**

The close proximity of the Indian border was a particular issue for youth in the southernmost VDCs. Many young people, especially those engaged with NGOs, expressed concern that levels of community cohesion and harmony were decreasing rapidly in the border region, with corresponding increases in crime rates. It was felt that the increased insecurity in this area was caused by high levels of impunity (i.e. criminals can easily commit a crime in one country and then escape over the border to safety), which in turn encouraged the proliferation of armed gangs and criminal groups.

“The closer you get to the border the more insecure you feel. The southernmost VDCs are in a state of lawlessness.”

- **Youth as ‘pawns’ for political parties**

A common concern amongst participants was the way political parties often use young people, recruiting them with promises of employment, security, power and a means through which to have their voices heard. Many young people felt that the only way they could voice their concerns and make a change to the current status quo was through joining a political party. However, the promises made by parties often never materialize and instead youth are used as the ‘front line’ in politics, to enforce *bandhas*, recruit followers and disrupt the activities of rival parties. Participants pointed out that young people in the eastern Terai, therefore, become a key target in times of unrest, with many violent forms of demonstration being led entirely by youth.

“Political parties use young people as weapons.”

- **The increasing number of competing demands for ethnic autonomy risks total fragmentation of Nepal**

Many respondents felt that, where previously communities were trapped between two conflicting sides (the Maoists and security forces), there are now a much larger number of groups to contend with. Many young people expressed a fear that Nepal would be “pulled into little pieces” by the various groups putting forth demands for autonomy and political recognition. In both districts, local youth pointed out the East-West highway as a key dividing line between groups, with Madhesi factions predominating south of the highway, and the Maoists and the Limbuwan movement dominating the northern areas of both districts. The common perception was that the highway area itself remains the frontline of the Terai conflict with no one group able to claim complete control.

“It is difficult to imagine a harmonious situation in Nepal, there are so many different ethnic groups all calling for power or autonomy.”

- **Perceived potential threats as much a cause of insecurity as immediate ones**

Almost as important to youth as the immediate threats to their security, was a perception that the situation could easily deteriorate. In particular, recent riots in Kapilvastu caused many to feel that what happened there could easily be repeated in Morang or Sunsari districts, with respondents in Biratnagar particularly worried that their city could become a flashpoint for future violence. Very few of the young people questioned trusted the ability of the district administration and the police force to be able to prevent the outbreak of such violence, or even to protect life and property if violence did break out.

“Seeing and hearing about the riots in Kapilbastu terrified us. We pray for god not to repeat such a horrific incident again. We might be next.”

2. Obstacles to peace:

○ Exclusion of marginalized groups (including youth) from decision-making a major underlying factor for continuing conflict in the Terai.

Amongst the young people that participated in the initial stages of this project, ‘freedom’ (or lack of it) was associated largely with access to forums through which they could get their voices heard. Many young people pointed out that the exclusionary nature of Nepali society coupled with strongly enforced notions of generational hierarchy, particularly in rural communities, means that young people have little say in community decisions. The proliferation of armed and violent groups in the Terai has further compounded the problem, with participants explaining that young people are often reluctant to speak out against rising crime and violence committed by their peers for fear of becoming a target themselves. Female participants belonging to the Madhesi community pinpointed marginalization from decision making arenas and little or no access to public mechanisms for security and justice as a particular obstacles to their security.

“As dalit Madheshi women we are right at the bottom of the pile. We are uneducated and often unable to leave our homes – how can we make the government in Kathmandu listen to us?”

○ Failure of government and political parties to address youth issues effectively.

Both the government itself and the political parties came under fire from youth in the eastern Terai for their failure to address, or even recognize, issues concerning young people. It was felt that neither the government nor political parties have any clear ‘vision’ for young people. Political parties, in particular, provide no constructive role for youth, instead using them as pawns in an attempt to enforce their influence at the local level (see above). Many also expressed disillusion in both local and national political leaders, with local leaders disappearing to Kathmandu once elected and national politicians failing to turn words into actions. Extremely common was the view that the national level peace process has excluded the voices of those outside of Kathmandu

“Though the politicians have signed a CPA this is only restricted to Kathmandu valley. They have no idea about our problems.”

and has therefore failed in addressing the root causes of conflict at the local level: the failure of political parties to effectively address issues of ethnic exclusion for example has created space for the emergence of numerous groups calling for ethnic autonomy which are severely increasing levels of insecurity in the region.

○ **Failure of government to provide adequate basic services has increased the vulnerability of young people to violent conflict.**

Many young people were frustrated with what they saw as the failure of the Government to deliver even basic services at the local level. Respondents from VDCs drew attention to the fact that the lack of roads, electricity, irrigation systems and effective educational facilities in their villages underpinned a situation of insecurity. It was felt that the lack of educational opportunities in particular rendered youth in VDCs vulnerable to recruitment and exploitation by political parties, criminal gangs and militias. This lack of education and resulting vulnerability is also a key factor in the trafficking of young women from villages in Nepal to cities in India and further afield.

“The lack of a road is one of the main obstacles to youth education and development in this VDC – if we want to study past high school we have to live away from home – we can’t afford to do that.”

○ **Ethnic, political and religious factionalism is undermining any common youth identity**

A key concern amongst youth in both Morang and Sunsari districts was the increasing division of society and communities along ethnic, religious and political lines. Many respondents pointed out that divisions are also emerging within ethnicities along political lines, for example, those for and against Madeshi autonomy. It was felt that youth themselves are becoming increasingly divided and the resulting lack of a coherent youth voice further weakens the ability of young people to advocate for a change to the current status-quo.

“Nepal is a country of many castes and cultures but the politicians have exploited and used identity as the medium to spread caste conflict.”

- **Youth in the eastern Terai felt that a lack of access to opportunities, including education and employment was a major factor in the number of young people joining gangs and militias.**

Throughout the consultation process, young people pointed out that a lack of access to opportunities underpinned their vulnerability to insecurity.

“The economy of the district deteriorating. Youth are not interested in business and enterprise development, instead they want to go abroad for foreign employment.”

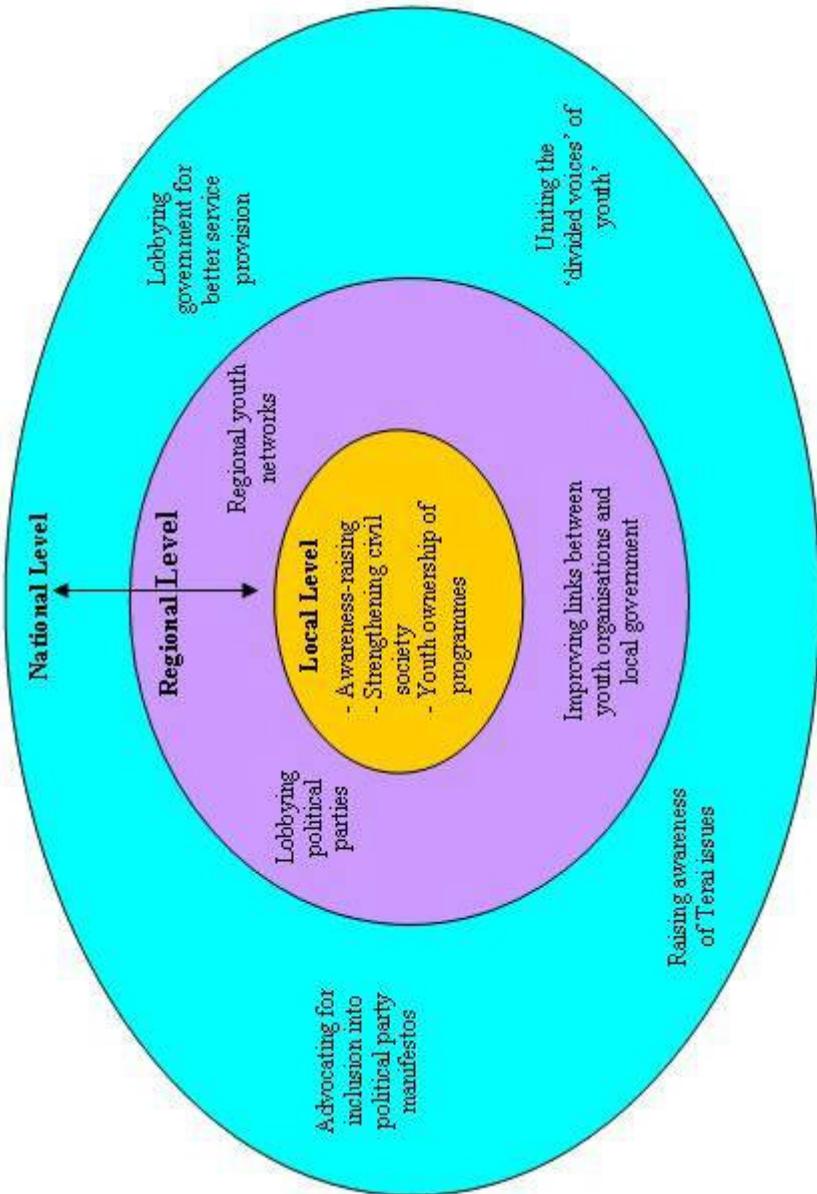
High levels of unemployment and a lack of access to education and skills training programs were major causes of frustration amongst youth in the eastern Terai. Many respondents

pointed out that even where educational opportunities are available, employment opportunities are not, leaving many highly qualified graduates and post-graduates jobless. Young people expressed frustration that the ongoing conflict in the Terai means that economic opportunities continue to decrease as the local economy struggles against continuous *bandhas*, sometimes up to fifteen days in one month. Many young people have no other choice to go to India or overseas as wage laborers in order to make a living.

“Proverbs like “an idle mind is the house of the devil” matches absolutely with the unemployed youth whose number in this area is quite high. They are easily exploited by other groups.”

3. Priorities for Peace – Potential Areas of Action

Although not the main focus of the initial phase of the project, many participants put forward ideas on how the current status quo could be changed. The following diagram notes some of these ideas and presents them as activities that could be undertaken at a local, regional and national level. The aim is to stimulate thinking about how to link youth-based activities at a local level to the national level to strengthen youth perspectives as part of the peace process.



Next Steps

- A **regional conference** will be held in the eastern Terai to build consensus on the key issues raised by the initial stages of the project and explore how youth can work together to raise awareness of these issues effectively at both regional and national levels;
- A **briefing paper** will be developed, using the knowledge gained at the local and regional levels to inform policy makers and donors on the particular issues facing youth in the eastern Terai;
- A **national conference** is scheduled to take place at the end of January in Kathmandu. This conference is designed to raise awareness on youth issues in the eastern Terai. It will be attended by policy makers, the donor community and interested stakeholders, as well as youth representatives from Kathmandu who will be invited to share their experiences of youth action nationally. The YSCs from each district will present district findings;
- There will be **media coverage** on a national scale, through mediums such as FM radio, print and television, in order to raise awareness of youth and community security issues in the eastern Terai as widely as possible;
- The conference will culminate in the production of an **‘action plan’** which will summarise the key findings of the project and provide a tool with which the Youth Steering Committees and other interested stakeholders can advocate for change at the local, district and regional levels.

Appendix

About the Organisations:

Friends for Peace

Friends for Peace is registered as a national NGO in Nepal and has been operational since March 2004. It was established with a view to facilitate credible national research in the field of conflict transformation and peacebuilding in order to contribute to future negotiations and the wider peace process. It works with local and international specialists on specific issues of concern in Nepal, convenes workshops for the sharing of experiences on peace processes from around the world and endeavors to be a leading research organisation providing a central source of information for a range of actors on conflict-related issues.

International Alert

Established in 1987, Alert is an independent peacebuilding organization working in over 20 countries and territories around the world. IA has been established in Nepal since 2002 and operates out of a country office in Kathmandu. The main aim of Alert's work in Nepal is to develop locally owned, sustainable processes that will harness the energies of national and international stakeholders to work together to address issues that cause and re-ignite conflict. In order to achieve this overarching goal we pursue four strategic objectives:

1. To strengthen the peacebuilding role of the international donor community,
2. To strengthen the peacebuilding role of national organizations and societal groups,
3. To build sustainable mechanisms for peaceful reintegration through research and dialogue,
4. To create vertical and horizontal linkages between national and local actors to promote socio-political change leading to a positive peace in Nepal.

Alert's core belief is to help people find their own solutions to conflict. Alert always works in partnership with local organisations and as such takes the lead on project management while at the same time building capacity of local partners in project management.

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