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## NEPAL | Constituent Assembly Urged to Heed Human Rights Commission Call

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) urges Nepal's Constituent Assembly to guarantee the rights of religious minorities in the new constitution, in line with the recent recommendation of the Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC).

The Constituent Assembly is currently in the process of framing the new Constitution required to establish the new secular republic of Nepal, the first draft of which is scheduled to be published by Jan. 22, 2015.

Asia News reports that the NHRC Chairman Anup Raj Sharma recommended "the state should be secular and guarantee rights to more minorities, protecting them from the Hindu majority" and pledged to defend freedom of conscience, whereby every citizen would have the right to choose his or her faith. The Nepal National Human Rights Commission is independent of the government. In his response to a petition by the National Christian Federation requesting that the government guarantee freedom of conscience for religious minorities, Sharma told Asia News he was "ready to fight for the rights of all citizens in Nepal", including Christians. This call for justice for minorities was echoed by Pushpakamal Dahal, the leader of the UCPN (Maoist) party, who said "every religion...must be guaranteed equal and fair treatment."

In a recent briefing on freedom of religion or belief in Nepal, CSW expressed concern about a proposed anti-conversion clause for the new constitution that "fails to allow choosing and changing one's faith to be seen as a positive individual choice or as a matter of individual rights." In the last few months, there have been calls by prominent political leaders in Nepal for a constitutional ban on all conversions from one religion to another. A powerful new alliance which includes many members of the governing Congress party is calling for Nepal to return to its former status as a Hindu state.

Nepal was formerly the only officially Hindu Kingdom in the world. But after a 10-year long conflict from 1996 to 2006, Nepal officially became a secular republic in 2008. In the intervening six years, it has failed to create the new Constitution required by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement which ended the military conflict.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "It is vital that Mr. Sharma's recommendation is reflected in the precise wording of the constitutional clauses dealing with religious affairs. CSW urges the Prime Minister, Ministers and Constituent Assembly members to ensure that calls to ban conversions are resisted, and that the new constitution guarantees freedom of religion or belief, as outlined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, signed and ratified

by Nepal, which guarantees every person the freedom to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.”