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NEPAL | Future Uncertain After Constituent Assembly Misses Constitution Deadline

Nepal's Constituent Assembly (CA) was unable to agree on a draft of the new constitution by the Jan. 22 deadline, raising fears among religious minorities that the constitutional negotiations, which also include provisions for guaranteeing secularism and religious freedom, may collapse altogether.

The CA is currently in the process of framing the new constitution of the new secular Republic of Nepal, as stipulated by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement which ended Nepal's 10-year military conflict in 2006. Prior to this, Nepal was formerly the only officially Hindu Kingdom in the world.

In a recent meeting of key inter-religious leaders of the main faiths present in Nepal, concern was expressed that the planned program of demonstrations by opposition parties may lead to conflict in the streets and a police "crack-down" on demonstrators similar to that on Jan. 22, during which the Terai Human Rights Defenders Alliance identified "excessive use of force."

On Jan. 21, the United Nations Resident coordinator Jamie McGoldrick appealed for the political parties to redouble their efforts to secure an inclusive constitution, to "provide forward-looking leadership in the larger national interest" and to "continue constitutional negotiations in a spirit of flexibility and urgency," a call echoed by civil society leaders, notably the Nepal Intellectuals Forum .

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "It is vital that Nepal's new constitution is inclusive and protects the rights of all faiths, particularly minority religions. Delays in finalizing a constitution which fully protects all human rights are likely to produce a dubious and uncertain future for religious minorities in the country. The present Interim Constitution does not guarantee full religious freedom, in particular the right to choose and change one's religion, to which Nepal is committed by the international treaties it has signed."