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NEPAL | Eight Christians Acquitted in Charikot Case

Eight Christians in Charikot, Nepal, who were accused of attempting to convert children to Christianity through the distribution of a comic book, were acquitted Dec. 6.

Prakash Pradhan, Bimal Shahi, Banita Dangol, Balkrishna Rai, Philip Tamang, Kiran Dahal, Bhimsen Tiwari and Shakti Pakhrin were arrested in June this year. The group was held in police custody for nine days and poorly treated in prison. Before being released on bail, local police officials charged them with attempting to convert children to Christianity through distributing a comic book which explains the story of Jesus.

The charges are thought to be the first in Nepal's history in which Article 26 (3) of the newly promulgated constitution was quoted, which states that "No person shall, in the exercise of the right conferred by this Article...convert another person from one religion to another or any act or conduct that may jeopardize other's religion and such act shall be punishable by law."

The arrests took place following two trauma counselling sessions organized by Teach Nepal, a Kathmandu-based non-governmental organization (NGO), at two schools in Charikot. The sessions sought to address the psychological needs of children affected by the earthquakes in Nepal in April 2015 and were held June 8 and 9 at Modern Nepal School and Mount Valley Academy in Charikot. At the end of the sessions, the organizers distributed a small gift pack to the children, which included a 23-page Christian comic book.

Prakash Pradhan (principal, Mount Valley Academy), Bimal Shahi (principal, Modern Nepal School), Banita Dangol (Teach Nepal staff), Balkrishna Rai (Teach Nepal staff), Philip Tamang (Teach Nepal staff), Kiran Dahal (Teach Nepal staff) and Bhimsen Tiwari (Teach Nepal staff) were arrested June 9. Shakti Pakhrin (pastor, Charikot Christian Church) was arrested June 14.

The final hearing in the case was postponed four times this year before it was held Dec. 6, and the court delivered an oral verdict dropping all charges and calling for the bail money to be returned to the eight Christians. The written verdict is expected within a month.

Pastor Tanka Subedi, founding member and chair of Dharmik Chautari Nepal and Religious Liberty Forum Nepal (RLF) said: "We are very happy with the court's decision. This has raised our trust in justice and democracy in Nepal."

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said: "We welcome this acquittal of the eight Christians in Charikot. However, we join our voices with civil society in Nepal in urging the government of Nepal to amend Section 26 of the new constitution and ensure that it – along with the draft penal code –guarantees full freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression. The right to freedom of religion or belief is of particular importance in Nepal as the country recently made the transition from a Hindu monarchy to a secular democratic republic."