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## Amnesty International

### Bhutan

Covering events from January - December 2004

**There was little progress towards a durable solution for more than 100,000 refugees from southern Bhutan living in camps in eastern Nepal. Nepali-speaking people in southern Bhutan continued to face discrimination. In March Bhutan abolished the death penalty.**

#### Background

The government continued drafting Bhutan's first Constitution, a process that began in 2002. A draft Constitution was expected to be made public in early 2005 and form the basis for public consultations at *Dzongkhag* (district) level.

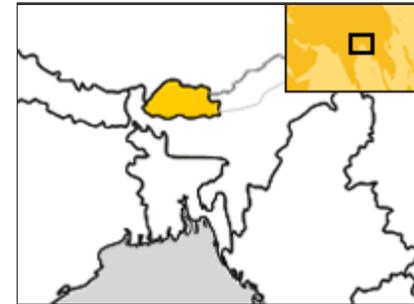
On 16 January Bhutan announced the end of a month-long operation to expel from its territory three armed separatist groups from north-east India – the United Liberation Front of Assam, National Democratic Front of Bodoland and Kamtapur Liberation Organization. It was reported by Bhutanese and Indian officials that 30 camps were destroyed and 650 combatants killed or taken into custody during the operation. Bhutanese authorities also said that up to 65,000 local people had been moved for their safety. In March the Bhutanese authorities launched a further operation against remaining members of India-based armed separatist groups. There were unconfirmed reports that Bhutanese civilians suspected of supporting these groups had been arrested and tortured.

In January Bhutan presented its first report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. The Committee identified access to education and political involvement as areas where women continue to be disadvantaged and called on Bhutan to include the principle of gender equality in its draft Constitution.

#### Refugees

Efforts to resolve the situation of Bhutanese refugees in eastern Nepal remained blocked during 2004. There was no progress in the first few months of the year, after Bhutan suspended talks following a violent incident during a visit by Bhutanese officials to Khudunabari refugee camp in December 2003. Only after Nepal issued a report into the incident in May did Bhutan accept in principle that the process could restart. However, there was no resumption of official bilateral talks or implementation of the agreement reached between Nepal and Bhutan in 2003 on the return of some refugees. Moreover, there were serious concerns about the conditions under which refugees might be required to return, and about the lack of monitoring of the process, since the UN refugee agency UNHCR continued to be denied access to Bhutan.

Following an announcement in 2003 of plans to reduce assistance in the camps, UNHCR planned to re-register the refugees. However, by the end of 2004, the Nepal government had not agreed to this.



Bhutan

#### Kingdom of Bhutan

**Head of state:** King Jigme  
Singye Wangchuck

**Head of government:** Yeshey  
Zimba (replaced Jigmi Thinley in  
August)

**Death penalty:** abolitionist for all  
crimes

**International Criminal Court:**  
not signed

**UN Women's Convention:**  
ratified

**Optional Protocol to UN  
Women's Convention:** not  
signed

#### Further information

[Amnesty International's concerns  
at the 55th Session of the  
Executive Committee of the  
United Nations High](#)

In October, a US Assistant Secretary of State visited India, Bhutan and Nepal in a high-level initiative aimed at resolving the stalemate.

### **Death penalty**

On 20 March the King issued a Royal Decree abolishing capital punishment. Although Bhutan is not known to have carried out an execution since 1964, the death penalty had previously been retained as a punishment for treason.

### **Education**

Children in southern Bhutan continued to face discrimination in access to education, in violation of the UN Children's Convention. It was reported that children from the Nepali-speaking community, especially those whose relatives were living in refugee camps in Nepal, as well as some Christian children, faced difficulties obtaining the Security Clearance Certificate required to enrol in school and sit exams.

### **Possible prisoners of conscience**

A number of possible prisoners of conscience from southern and eastern Bhutan remained in prison, although there were unconfirmed reports that some had been released on completion of their sentences.

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[Commissioner for Refugees](#)  
(AI Index: IOR 41/031/2004)

[Death Penalty News, June 2004](#)  
(AI Index: ACT 53/001/2004)

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[All AI documents on Bhutan](#)