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BRIEFING: Top official stands up for Nepali women

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Nepal has recently undergone a period of political turmoil, most recently resulting in the postponement of an important constitutional assembly election. Washington Times staff reporter Rita Tiwari spoke with Nepalese Minister of Foreign Affairs Sahana Pradhan.

Question: As a woman foreign minister of Nepal, what issues did you raise in the U.N. General Assembly to empower the women of Nepal?

Answer: I addressed the issues of property rights, citizenship rights and at least 33 percent representation in parliament and government bodies that was declared by our Parliament on May 30.

Q: You have been asking for 33 percent representation of women from all walks of life — why not 50 percent? Aren't you minimizing the role of women fighters during the decade old Maoist insurgency and people's movement of April 2006?

A: Your question is very much appropriate, and I am for 50 percent representation of women as they constitute 50 percent of the population, but as a government minister, I have to follow the Parliament's declaration.

Q. As a senior female leader of the country, what do you see as the major problems faced by Nepalese women?

A. I have been in politics since 1948 when Nepal had no school for women. The women were not given the opportunity to study, and they were treated as second-class citizens. I thought this was very important issue and that I should be there to address this issue. I fought for it in the street and was arrested and imprisoned for 16 days. While in custody, we were only four girls among the 81 prisoners. We were all taken to the palace of Rana Prime Minister Padma Shamshere who was surprised to see the girls and asked, "Why are you girls in the street? I don't understand. It is reasonable to see men in the street with demands, but why you girls?" I replied that we were there to demand a school for the girls. So, this is how first school for girls in Nepal was founded in 1948.

Q. What role do you see for women in the postconflict transformation decision-

making process? Do you think they can influence the constitution-making process in order to empower the women?

A. In Nepal, women awoke very late compared to other countries. Yogmaya Neupane was the first woman to raise the question of women's rights in Nepal. Since then, four of us came forward

in 1948 and in 1951. We got the voting right along with men. We did not have to fight for several decades like the Western women for voting rights. And now, I think, the women in Nepal are very much conscious of their rights. They are demanding property rights, and they are seeking identity of women. Women should have their own identity, not affiliated with the identity of man. So far, they don't have their own identity — they are identified with their parents or husband or sons. So, now, even in remote and backward areas of the country lacking literacy, the women have become very much conscious of their rights.

Q. What is the contribution of Maoist movement to the women's empowerment in Nepal?

A. I think the Maoist women during the last 10 years have changed way of thinking of the backward women in the villages. Women in the villages have now become very much forward, enlightened, and they have begun to assert their existence, of their identity and of their right. So in that sense, Maoists have done very good job in awakening the women — making them conscious of their rights, making them conscious of their identity and have organized them for the agitation. They are now capable of handling state responsibilities. The Maoist leader Prachanda has said that women are the most disciplined cadres in his party.

Q. We have been reading in the news that political instability and insecurity in your country has forced many Nepali youth and women to migrate to foreign lands where they are facing abuse either by their employers and employment agencies. What role, if any, have you played in addressing this issue? Did you make any representation with the concerned governments while you were in the U.N.?

A. Due to the pitiful political situation in the country, people have left the country in search of jobs. Until only six or seven years back, Nepalese people were just in India and Malaysia, but now I see them all over the world. I have met Nepalese who did not want to be away from the country, but they were compelled under the circumstances. They was no other way to stay in the old country, but I think if things turn better or peace prevails in Nepal, I think these people will return.

[Regarding the United Nations], if I happen to meet the person where I can speak about it, I certainly will raise the issue of abuse. But not all are having problems. I think most of them are getting really nice opportunities they are making good life.

Q: Why was the proposed election to the Constituent Assembly postponed?

A: Maoists demand that the monarchy be abolished right away and a proportional electoral system be introduced, but the prime minister refused to do so. In my view, it is not necessary to declare a republic from the parliament because even the Nepali Congress Party, which was against the republic, has now accepted the republic. In my view, the prime minister should have opted for proportional representation system rather than postponing the election.

Q. In light of the recent political trouble that Nepal has seen, what would you like to see the United States do in its relationship with Nepal? Does the United States have a role in Nepal? If so, what? Do China and/or India have a role? If so, what?

A. So far we are getting very much international cooperation from all the countries you have mentioned. Whoever I met, all of them offered their support for constitution assembly elections.

Q. If Nepal's turmoil continues, will that have an effect on regional stability?

A. We are very sorry that Madhesh situation is getting more troublesome. We are very much connected to India in the south. Naturally, we will have to deal with India's concerns. Our trouble in the south or Madhesh does not affect China at all. Because China is quite far away from Nepal's troubled areas.

Q. How can the Nepalese diaspora be helpful or can play role in peace building process in Nepal?

A. I think the routine dialogue among the different parties will pave the way for peace. We have been doing all these things with international cooperation. We can bring peace in the country by being very cooperative to each other.

Nepal monarchy on the wane

KATMANDU, Nepal (AP)

Parliament began debate yesterday on abolishing the world's last Hindu monarchy, and the only question for most lawmakers was when to get rid of the king.

Nepal's former communist rebels, who last year signed a peace deal and joined parliament, want the monarchy abolished immediately, and threaten a campaign of strikes and protests if they don't get their way.

But the country's largest political party, the Nepali Congress, said the king should be removed only after the election of a special assembly to rewrite the Himalayan nation's constitution, a vote that has been repeatedly postponed.

The two sides aired their differing views at a special session called to keep the communists, known as Maoists, from starting their threatened protest campaign.

Just before parliament began the debate, thousands of Maoist supporters demonstrated in the capital, Katmandu.

"Declare the country a republic state. Kick out the king," chanted the estimated 5,000 activists and supporters who marched through the main streets of Katmandu.
