



KATHMANDU, NEPAL: Heather Bar, center, a researcher at the New York-based Human Rights Watch speaks during the release of a report on child marriage in Nepal yesterday. — AP

NEPAL CRITICIZED FOR NOT STOPPING CHILD MARRIAGES

PROGRESS TO COMBAT THE PROBLEM?

KATHMANDU, NEPAL: Traditional practices, poverty, last year's massive earthquake and Nepal's ongoing political instability mean child marriages remain a serious problem in the country, where 10 percent of the girls marry before they are 15, even though the government says it is making progress to combat the problem, rights groups say.

New York-based Human Rights Watch said government indifference means it has not taken the concrete steps needed to achieve the goal of completely stopping the practice in Nepal, which has the third-highest rate of such marriages in Asia after Bangladesh and India.

Nepalese government officials, however, said the Himalayan nation has made significant progress in stopping child marriage and has new policies and laws to address the issue, including a new law that says both men and women have to be 20 before they can legally marry. But child-rights groups say the earthquake that killed thousands and made millions homeless, plus the country's ongoing political instability, is making the situation worse in one of the poorest nations in the world.

Not done enough

A report released by Human Rights Watch on yesterday said the government has not done enough to end the practice of child marriage, adding there was little evidence of the government working effectively to try to prevent child marriage or mitigate the harm that married children experience.

The report "Our Time to Sing and Play" said that although child marriage has been illegal in Nepal since 1963, researchers found that "police rarely act to prevent child marriage or bring charges, and almost never do so unless a complaint is filed. Government officials

often officially register child marriages, even though child marriage is a crime."

The report said a majority of the children who marry young were from Nepal's Dalit or indigenous communities, reflecting the greater prevalence of child marriage in marginalized and lower-caste communities. It said poverty, lack of access to education, child labor, social pressures, and dowry practices were among the factors driving child marriage.

The last survey by the government in 2011 found that 41 percent of girls married before the age of 18. According to UNICEF, the UN's child protection agency, 37 percent of girls married before the age of 18 and 10 percent were married before the age of 15.

Sunmaya Tamang, now 23, married when she was 14 and gave birth to a boy the next year. "I was not aware there are laws that say we cannot marry young. Nobody told us or tried to stop us," said Tamang, adding that marrying at that age meant she was not able to finish her schooling and was forced to work in a carpet factory to support her family. She now works cleaning houses in Kathmandu to help her family.

"If I was able to complete school, I would have a better job, better life," she said.

She would not say if her parents forced her into the early marriage. Many such marriages are arranged by parents who try to find suitable grooms when their daughters are still very young.

It is rare for a girl to complain to the authorities even if they know their marriage is illegal, fearing that would get their parents in trouble. And even if they do, police are reluctant to act, said Rashmila Shakya of Child Workers In Nepal, a children's rights organization. "Police and authorities give least priority to child marriage cases because it is just

accepted reality for them," Shakya said.

The earthquake that struck in April last year not only killed about 9,000 people, but also made nearly 4 million people homeless, which according to Shakya has made the situation worse. "Families in the earthquake-hit areas are desperate. They want to marry off their daughters so they have one less mouth to feed," Shakya said, adding no surveys have been carried out to find out how prevalent that is, but the number is believed to be significant.

Instability

Political instability - the ninth government in 10 years took power last month - and ethnic troubles, which mean a constitution that was adopted last year is still not fully enforced because minority groups oppose it, also deflect attention from the problem.

Shakya said as the country, politicians and bureaucrats struggle with one crisis after another, protection of children's rights does not get the priority it deserves. Government officials deny the charges and say the country is making good progress.

Dr. Kiran Rupakhetee at the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare, said that includes changing the legal age of marriage to 20 for both men and women as part of a government policy to end child marriage. Earlier, exceptions were allowed for marriages after the age of 18 if there was parental consent but now there are no exceptions.

Violators can be jailed for three years and fined 10,000 rupees (\$95), which is more than the monthly salary for many people. "For the first time child marriage is protected by the constitution, which says it is illegal," said Rupakhetee, adding the government this year also adopted a national strategy plan to end child marriages. — AP

ATTACKS HAVE KILLED 44 PAKISTANIS WORKING ON CHINA CORRIDOR SINCE 2014

KARACHI, PAKISTAN: Militants trying to disrupt construction of an "economic corridor" linking China with Pakistan's coast have killed 44 workers since 2014, an official said on yesterday, a rising toll likely to reinforce Chinese worry about the project's security. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a \$46 billion network of roads, railways and energy pipelines linking western China to a deep-water port on Pakistan's Arabian Sea coast, which passes through Pakistan's troubled Baluchistan province.

Pakistani officials say they have taken tough measures and that security has greatly improved in Baluchistan, a resource-rich region where ethnic Baluch separatists have battled the government for years. They oppose the CPEC.

Colonel Zafar Iqbal, a spokesman for construction company Frontier Works Organization (FWO), said all of the workers killed were Pakistani and most fell victim to roadside bombs and attacks on construction sites. "The latest figure has climbed up to 44 deaths and over 100 wounded men on CPEC projects mainly road construction in Baluchistan, which began in 2014," Iqbal told Reuters.

Toll accelerated this year

In November 2015, the official figure was 25 killed, indicating that the toll has accelerated this year. The Pakistani projects are part of a Chinese plan to build land, sea and air routes across Asia and beyond boosting trade and winning new markets overseas for Chinese companies as domestic growth slows. Chinese officials have appealed for improved security in Baluchistan and other regions where projects are planned or under way. In a bid to address their fears, Pakistan last year created an army division, believed to number more than 10,000 troops, to focus specifically on protecting CPEC projects and Chinese workers.

FWO, which is owned by the Pakistani army, has been awarded the bulk of road-building contracts in Baluchistan and other volatile areas in Pakistan. Pakistani officials concede security problems remain in Baluchistan, but say the work is progressing ahead of schedule. — Reuters

NEPAL'S NEW LEADER PLEDGES TO SPEED UP QUAKE REBUILDING

KATHMANDU: Nepal's new prime minister promised yesterday to speed up reconstruction after a devastating earthquake and said he would increase aid for homeless victims as he laid out his government's priorities.

The previous administration had been heavily criticized for the slow pace of rebuilding, with a \$4.1 billion reconstruction fund largely untouched over a year after the April 2015 disaster. Pushpa Kamal Dahal, a former Maoist guerrilla who took over as prime minister last month, said his government would increase the compensation for those who lost their homes in the quake from 200,000 rupees (\$1,882) to 300,000. "Speeding up the reconstruction and building after the earthquake... falls in the priority of this government," he told parliament.

"The government will not tolerate any carelessness or delay in this work." Nearly 9,000 people died in the 7.8-magnitude earthquake and millions more were left homeless. Many now face a second winter without proper shelter because they have still not received the compensation money they need to start rebuilding their homes. — AFP



KATHMANDU, NEPAL: Nepalese Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, also known as Prachanda addressing the nation at parliament in Kathmandu on September 8, 2016. — AP