

Rights group concern over Nepal

A human rights group has expressed concern over what it calls the growing number of civilian casualties in the conflict in Nepal.

The US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) has appealed to both the government and Maoist rebels to take extreme caution to avoid civilian casualties.

The Maoists have been engaged in an armed struggle since 1996 to replace the monarchy with a communist republic.

At least 13,000 people have lost their lives in the insurgency.

HRW had earlier blamed both Nepalese troops and Maoist rebels for kidnapping and killings in the country's civil war.

Vigilante groups

HRW official Sam Zia Zarifi said that both the government and Maoist rebels were using civilian facilities in the fighting.

The rights group survey team said the Royal Nepalese Army was dropping explosives and mortar from helicopters causing a number of civilian casualties.

It also said the rebels made use of houses of civilians to take shelter and launch attacks against government forces.

HRW also appealed to the Maoists to immediately stop the practice of recruiting children to its armed wing and to the government to devise policies for the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers.

The HRW team also appealed to the government to stop supporting and, in some cases, arming vigilante groups to take on the rebels.

The authorities deny any support for vigilantes.

HRW says there have been some improvements in Nepal, mainly due to sustained international pressure.

It said it had not found any new cases of disappearances and that the practice of the authorities re-arresting people had declined.

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