



# Status of Human Rights in Bhutan

**Delivered by**

Global Campaign for the Release of Political Prisoners in Bhutan



# Statement Structure

- Status of political prisoners in Bhutan
- State of Bhutanese refugees - lack of repatriation or family reunion
- Absence of national human rights institutions



# Political Prisoners

- No previous recommendations explicitly on political prisoners
- 34 political prisoners, primarily ethnic Nepali-speaking, serving sentences since 1990
- ICRC stopped its service to facilitate family visit to prisoners. Families prohibited from visiting by themselves
- Prisoners and their family not allowed to communicate in any form



# Political Prisoners

- Couple of recently released prisoners were not allowed to stay in Bhutan – not even few hours. They were loaded to van and dropped across the border in India
- Prisoners' health deteriorating, and they hardly visit hospitals
- Human Rights Watch, UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention & former political prisoners confirm the detainees are imprisoned under false charges



# Political Prisoners

- Issue of political prisoners was selectively hidden when Bhutan's human rights records were discussed
- Royal Government of Bhutan never made public the status of political prisoners
- None of the countries in previous UPR cycles questioned or recommended Bhutan about political prisoners



# Recommendations: Political Prisoners

- Grant general amnesty to all the political prisoners immediately and unconditionally.
- Provide them with proper rehabilitation and settle them inside Bhutan with adequate compensation.
- Invite the ICRC International Committee of the Red Cross to monitor the condition of prisons and facilitate families' visits to their loved ones in prisons.



# Bhutanese Refugees

- In past UPR cycles, 39 recommendations from 25 countries, that Bhutan repatriate Bhutanese refugees living in refugee camps in Nepal
- Bhutan noted all those recommendations
- Not a single refugee have so far been repatriated
- Bhutan repeatedly denied negotiating with Nepal on repatriation of these refugees



# Bhutanese Refugees

- Of around 120,000 Bhutanese refugees, 113,500 have been resettled in 8 developed countries between 2007-2016
- Rest of the refugees still living in Nepal longing to return to Bhutan
- UNHCR suspended its operation on 31-12-2020 and closed its field office in Damak.
- Remaining refugees get no support – financial or material





# Recommendations: Bhutanese Refugees

- Immediately develop a process for repatriating all those Bhutanese refugees who wish to return with honour and dignity in a time-bound manner, under the supervision of the UNHCR.
- Guarantee the right of former Bhutanese citizens with overseas passports to obtain tourist visas, so as to enable them to visit Bhutan to meet their near and dear ones.



# National Human Rights Institution

- At least eight countries in previous UPR cycles recommended establishing a national human rights institution.
- Bhutan has ignored the calls so far
- Constitution or national laws does not spell out the provision of any such institution. There has not been any efforts from government to formulate for legal framework enabling a national institution on human rights



# National Human Rights Institution

- In absence of a national human rights institution, instances of human rights violations continue
  - Unlawful state seizures of private land
  - Lack of lawyers to represent defendants in cases involving state
  - Sexual and gender-based violence against girls and women
  - Many residents rendered stateless
  - Declining press freedom and freedom of expression



# Recommendations: National Human Rights Institution

- Take immediate measures to establish an independent Human Rights Institution in line with the Paris Principle.
- Eliminate all obstacles that curtail the freedom of press, speech and expression
- Allow civil society organisations to organise freely and to work on any issue they choose
- End citizenship discrimination
- Allow international human rights organisations to operate in the country