

Sons of soil close down Nepal

Armed with nothing more than green flags and their demand for autonomous states, Nepal's sons of soil - the first communities to take up residence in the kingdom - enforced a nationwide closure Wednesday that crippled the capital and affected outer districts.

Kathmandu valley lay paralysed by the general strike call given by the Nepal Adivasi Janajati Mahasangh, an umbrella organisation of nearly 60 groups from different communities.

This is the seventh closure called this month by the Mahasangh. Earlier this month, they had enforced a Kathmandu valley shutdown, followed by five more regional bandhs (closures).

Educational institutions, shops and markets and many business establishments remained closed in the capital Wednesday. Public transport disappeared and large numbers of commuters could be seen walking to their destinations.

Protesters, including women and teens, stood sentry at prominent city squares, stopping intrepid two-wheelers and asking them to go back.

There were preliminary reports of at least half a dozen motorcycles being vandalised and a bus, returning from a wedding, being set on fire. The unarmed Mahasangh activists have been waging non-violent protests since last year.

'Our organisation includes adivasis, communities who were the original settlers in Nepal, and janajatis (indigenous communities),' Pasang Sherpa, chief of the Mahasangh, told IANS.

'Despite being the first settlers, we are still the most underprivileged.

'We want separate autonomous states for different communities with the right to self-determination and proportional representation in the parliament.

'We also want the government to make Nepal an actual secular state, effacing all national icons that still have Hindu undertones, like the cow, Nepal's national animal, that is associated with Hinduism.'

The closure comes even as another ethnic group, the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum, has begun a week-long transport shutdown and trading point blockade in the Terai plains.

The Forum, a group of plains people living along the Indian border, is demanding an autonomous Madhes state in the plains.

Their closure call, given since Monday, has closed the highway that is Nepal's lifeline, connecting it with India and providing the route for trucks carrying essential supplies food and fuel from the southern neighbour.

The Forum says it will withdraw its strike and begin talks with the government only after home minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula resigns, owing moral responsibility for the death of at least 29 people in the Terai protests since January.

The Forum and Mahansangh this month announced that they have joined forces and from coming Monday, would enforce an indefinite closure nationwide if the government continued to ignore their demands. Though the Maoist insurgents ended their decade-old armed struggle last year by signing a peace pact with the government, inspired by their success, other groups have now begun a series of protests.

The disruptions, especially in the southern plains, where nearly half of Nepal's population lives, compelled the UN's top envoy in Nepal, Ian Martin to warn the world body Monday that it may become impossible to hold elections in June if the protests continue.

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