

Government, ethnic groups close to agreement in Nepal

The Nepalese government and an ethnic group Monday said they were close to clinching a deal to end nearly two weeks of crippling general strike in southern Nepal and to address demands of the ethnic Madhesi community living there.

Leaders of the United Democratic Madhesi Front, which spearheaded the general strike in the southern plains known as Terai, said most of the issues had been resolved.

'We have agreed on most issues including the autonomous state for Terai,' UDMF leader Hridesh Tripathy said. 'We are still negotiating on the final agreement that would reflect the aspirations of the people.'

Nepalese media Monday reported that the government had agreed in principle with the demands for an autonomous state but reiterated its position that it could only happen after the elections.

Reports said the government had also agreed to increase the representation of southern Nepal in the constituent assembly to 30 percent and provide compensation to those killed in the course of protests.

But differences remained between the two sides on a range of issues to be negotiated Monday.

The UDMF is reportedly pushing for a postponement of the elections until early June from April as well as a constitutional amendment to guarantee the agreement.

Reports quoted government sources as saying that both demands had been rejected by the government negotiators.

'It is a big setback for Terai movement because the agreement is not constitutionally binding,' another ethnic leader Jaya Prakash Gupta said.

'The constituent assembly will not have the powers to recognise southern Nepal as an autonomous state and that has to be guaranteed by the constitution which needs to be amended,' Gupta said.

Meanwhile, southern Nepal continued to remain under general strike for the 13th day Monday with several places under curfew and essential supplies including fuel and food running out.

At least two people have died and over 250 people, including police officers, injured in violence across the regions since the strike began.

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