



## **ASIA/NEPAL - We need more attention concerning the education and nutrition of the Chepang indigenous children**

Shaktikhor (Agenzia Fides) - The Chepang population, one of the most disadvantaged and marginalized indigenous groups of Nepal, is fighting for the education of their children. Those who manage to send them to school, even if it means selling their livestock, worry that poverty can contribute to put an end to education. In the last census in 2001, 52 000 Chepangs were registered, but activists say that since then the number has at least doubled. The Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities estimates 59 indigenous groups in the country that make up over 37% of the 30 million inhabitants. According to the data of Nepal's Central Bureau of Statistics, the literacy rate is about 23% out of 90 000 Chepangs of 54 villages including the districts of Chitwan, Dhading, Gorkha, Makwanpur, Lamjung and Tanahu, against a national average of 40%. A chronic problem of this population mainly engaged in agriculture, is food insecurity. Families depend on the 2 annual harvests which last 3 months each, over 80% live below the poverty line, which together with the distance of residential areas from schools, exacerbates the problem of literacy. In most villages there is only a primary school for an entire area, and children are forced to walk for hours to reach the school. Most of the time when they arrive they are exhausted and hungry because they are not able to eat in the morning and cannot do their homework when they return home. To try to tackle the problem, the government has provided the young Chepangs a free hostel where they can also eat and avoid walking for hours.

However, the school has only room for 40 children, while in the village of Shaktikhor alone there are over a thousand. The situation of these communities is very critical and need more programs for the education of children. In the area of Ramnagar, 20 km from Shaktikhor, a group of Indian missionaries had opened a school for only Chepang children, the Navodaya School, however, it cannot follow more than 200 students. Each year they receive over 350 applications for registration, but only 35 can be accepted. (AP) (Agenzia Fides 01/08/2012)