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Kathmandu, Oct 19 - Though a ceasefire between the government and the Maoist guerrillas has held for over a year now, yet Nepal is passing through one of its goriest periods with thousands of animals being sacrificed daily on the occasion of Dashain, the biggest Hindu festival in the country.

On Friday, the eighth day of the nearly fortnight-long celebrations, animal killings reach a crescendo, with buffaloes, goats and chickens being slaughtered at the altars of various deities of power.

Amidst growing protests by animal rights activists, a group of Buddhist monks has begun silent prayers to pray for the souls of the animals sacrificed during the festival.

Hundreds of red-robed lamas - Buddhist monks - led by the Nepal Ahimsavadi Bouddha Dharma Vishwa Shanti Chakra Sangh stopped speaking from Thursday in monasteries across 22 districts to issue silent prayers for the welfare of all creatures of god.

The soundless prayers started from Lumbini town in southern Nepal, where the Buddha was born.

The Nyunge Maun Brata - silent prayers - will continue till Saturday, when the key part of the festival concludes with the tika -- priests and elders smearing vermilion on worshippers' foreheads in blessing.

Though from a Hindu kingdom Nepal became a secular country last year, non-Hindu communities complain that the government still remains hard-core Hindu, ignoring other religions.

A delegation of Buddhist, Muslim and other religious communities has petitioned Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, over 200 members of parliament and Speaker Subhash Chandra Nembang this month, when the festival started, urging for equal treatment to all religious communities.

The delegation is asking the government to stop the tradition of observing a 10-day holiday in all government offices to celebrate the festival.

Prior to the petition, Muslims had urged the prime minister to declare Id-ul-Fitr, observed by Muslims worldwide after a month of fasting, as a national holiday. However, their plea went unheeded.

Though media groups and private radio stations have been campaigning for a bloodless Dashain and more kindness to animals, the campaigns have been largely ignored by Nepalis.

An SMS opinion poll by a private television station showed over 60 percent of the respondents saying the festival would remain incomplete without animal sacrifices while nearly 20 percent said they would think of it next year.

The tradition of animal sacrifices received a boost Thursday when King Gyanendra came out of his palace, despite opposition by the Maoists, to offer a goat at the altar of the goddesses of power at one of the main temples of the capital.