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Non-State Actors in Nepal

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Non-State Actors in

NEPAL



A young soldier from the Maoist army's second battalion listens to speakers during a cultural program and remembrance ceremony in the village of Kholagaun in the Maoist heartland of Nepal.

BACKGROUND

Since the end of the monarchy in 1951, Nepal has faced governmental problems. A multi-party democracy was established in 1990, but since then Nepal has had 14 governments. A Maoist insurgency began in 1996 and has claimed thousands of civilian, government and rebel lives. In 2001, nine members of the royal family were killed in a shooting spree by Prince Dipendra, son of the late King Birendra, who then turned the gun on himself. The Maoist insurgency has tried to fill the void left by the monarchy and an ongoing struggle ties together the government and rebel groups, also known as non-state actors (NSAs).

Nepal, a nation of 24 million people, contains prime conditions for rebellious groups. The country is home to widespread poverty, an undemocratic government, a murdered royal family and a feudal system run by rich landlords. Government forces have tried to combat the Maoists, or Moabadi, but two peaceful negotiations have thus far proved unsuccessful.

by Ellie Loveman, MAIC

After digging deeper into the Maoist issue, evidence arises on both sides; Maoists are a threat and a benefit to the Nepalese. It is not uncommon for a group of Maoist guerillas to enter villages and take away innocent civilians in order to convert them to soldiers. Even women and children cannot escape the impending possibility. Opponents of the Maoists' political beliefs might be dragged from their homes and shot. One man living in Musikot, the region's official rebel capitol, Nayan Singh Damai, said he was attacked on his way to a political rally in 1998. He was injured and lost one of his legs. In fear of being killed by rebels, he lives four hours from

his village and only sees his wife two times per year. "My only offense was I had different political beliefs," he said.

On the other hand, villagers have seen positive influence from the Maoist presence. For example, in Rukum district, 250 miles from Katmandu, rebels have built many trails and concrete bridges as well as dug canals and put in pipes to channel water to many villages. Bhim Dhangri, a farmer who supports the rebellion, believes the rebels can revolutionize agriculture. He said, "The poor farmers were getting poorer and exploited by the landlords who were getting richer and fatter everyday. We have taken the farms from these landlords

and distributed them to the people who actually work on them. We are teaching them how to get maximum production out of their farms."

BUT I THOUGHT MAOISTS WERE FROM CHINA

Mao Tse-Tung of Hunan, China, established the Maoist belief of eliminating the class system and allowing peasants to have more power. His political ideas have found their way into the minds of a Nepal insur-



Kumri, Nepal's Living Goddess, sits in a chariot outside her palace in Katmandu.

THE MINES

According to RAOnline, both the Royal Nepalese Army and the Maoists were using mines or improvised explosive devices (IEDs) as of November 2003. The Maoists used wire-detonated pressure cookers packed with explosives to target passing military vehicles. The Maoists attacked military vehicles as well as personnel at checkpoints. In addition, the Maoists blocked mountain roads and prevented the army's ability to move. In 2002, 202 people were killed in explosions, 52 of which were civilians, and a quarter of those were children.

THE IMPACT

The *Landmine Monitor* reported that Maoists used landmines in 2002 to prevent security forces trying to enter Maoist controlled villages. In 2002, there were incidents involving landmines and IEDs in 72 of 75 districts, and the increase in mine use has had a socio-economic impact. Mine-affected areas prevent the movement of people both internally and from the outside coming in.

Although exact numbers of casualties cannot be determined because there are no official records on landmine casualties in Nepal, 720 casualties were reported in 2002. This included 202 killed and 518 injured, including 313 civilians, of which 49 were women and 46 were children. In 2003, media reports included 13 casualties, (four killed and nine injured) from January 29 through May.

AID AND RESPONSE

Members of the Royal Nepalese Army have worked to defuse or destroy mines wherever they discover them. According to an army officer, the mines are defused on site and numbers of mines cannot be determined. An army official acknowledged the challenge of removing new types of mines and that more training is necessary. There are no formal education programs in Nepal, but the NCBI has helped raised awareness and published a pictorial book entitled *Beware of Dangerous Things*.

agency group who wish to overthrow the monarch in Nepal and create a Communist republic.

The Maoists in Nepal began their mission in 1996 and have been steadily strengthening in power and force. Despite the efforts of the current monarch, the Maoists have gained support from the people and have been able to take Security Forces by surprise, even in the capital city of Kathmandu. In addition, the ability of the Maoists to catch the Security Forces off guard suggests that the Maoists are better informed about the locations and weaknesses of the Security Forces than vice versa. Casualties from the police side are higher than those from the army, a fact that increases the possibility that the army has neglected to confront the Maoist groups.

GAINING GROUND: RECENT ACTIONS OF THE NEPALESE MAOISTS

In 2002, the Maoist war strategy had three phases: strategic defensive, strategic stalemate and strategic offensive. The Maoists in Nepal go by the name Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN (M)) and reached a stalemate with the government in 2002. Although the CPN (M) did not match the government in terms of troop strength and military equipment, they did match the government in actions, initiatives and control of the countryside. In 2002, Puskar Gautam, a Nepalese newspaper columnist and former Maoist commander said, "The Maoists appear to have decided that the time is ripe for their *war ki par* ('do or die') moment." He also noted that the CPN (M) think a quick push when the government is vulnerable would give them the best chance for success. In April 2002, the insurgency began to target infrastructure by blowing up hydroelectric power plants, bridges, telecommunications centers and government buildings. In addition, public places in Kathmandu were bombed on an almost daily basis.

In 2002, the CPN (M) numbered 3,000–4,000 in "hardcore militants" (regular troops), and 10,000–15,000 men organized in local militias. Thousands of activists worked in the countryside as well and provided additional support to the Maoist-related violence that found its way into almost all of Nepal's 75 districts.

The CPN (M) is also one of the wealthiest rebel movements in Asia, due to bank robberies and collection of a "revolutionary tax" from people in areas under its control. It has netted an estimated between five and 10 billion Nepalese rupees (\$64 million–\$128 million U.S.).

The CPN (M) also had contact with several million Nepalese working in neighboring India, and the main organization among them, the Akhil Bharatiya Nepali Ekta Samaj (All-India Nepalese Unity Society), was banned in July 2002 for links to the CPN (M). Despite support from groups in India, Nepal and Belgium, the CPN (M) is not supported by any foreign power or major group abroad. Even China, where the CPN (M)'s ideas were born, has given its support to the Nepalese government, labeling the CPN (M) as ultra-radicals and not "true Maoists."

After the Maoists broke the six-month ceasefire and attacked military positions in November 2001, the Nepalese police lost control of the Maoist problem. Duties fell to the Nepalese army, which met many challenges as it tried to combat the determined efforts of the Maoists. For example, the army did not have prior experience with combat and were poorly equipped.

Government forces scoured the countryside in search of Maoists, shooting all suspected persons. According to Nepalese human rights organizations and journalists in the field, many of those shot were likely civilians caught in crossfire or wrongly accused. With the government shooting innocent people, support for the Maoists increased in the countryside. Government efforts to limit food supplies to the Maoists led to a shortage of food and medicines for the common people and famine became a large problem in the western part of the country.

Apart from the unnecessary shootings, the Nepalese government made headway in terms of lessening insurgent activities. For example, newspapers and periodicals that sympathized with the Maoists were shut down and a few journalists and intellectuals were detained during the emergency.

MAOIST SUCCESS: WHY IT WORKS SO WELL

The Maoists in Nepal have been able to meet their goals in western Nepal for several

reasons. First, the government loosely controls the western areas and communications are poor. Likewise, Hindu influences are weak and thus less of a threat to the revolutionary actions and thoughts of the Maoists. Finally, in the West, people belong primarily to Mongolian ethnic groups, which are free from upper-caste chauvinism. Mongolians are also more receptive to Marxist ideas and make very good fighters. In order to prevent a moral "putting-all-your-eggs-in-one-basket" situation, the Maoists launched struggles in other parts of the country as a means of spreading and weakening police forces.

In addition, the Maoists see three stages through which they must pass in order to reach their ultimate goal. These stages are defeating the Nepalese police, fighting the Indian army and conquering the Royal Nepalese Army. The Nepalese Maoists have been able to carry out their activities because of their strength and financial security.

ACTIVITY IN 2003 AND 2004

Conflict between the Maoists and the government continued into the third year after the massacre of the royal family. Not only did fighters suffer, but civilians were faced with famine and lack of medical help. According to the United Nations, the far west of Nepal faced serious food shortages, mainly because supply routes were saturated with fighting and insecurity. Humla, a mountaintop town, was luckier than other areas because of active local leaders who initiated change. Jeevan Bahadur Shahi, former elected chief of the district development council, said, "We made a lot of progress, but this Maoist rebellion has set us back 100 years. That's what I feel. They [the rebels] control most of Humla now and the government is powerless." The Maoists have closed down a health clinic and destroyed buildings and bridges in the district.

According to a news release on July 20, 2004, Nepal's new coalition government has decided to hold peace talks with the Maoist rebels. A statement from the cabinet meeting held the previous week says, "The cabinet has decided to call the help of all quarters to help the government to hold a meaningful, reliable and result-oriented peace talks with the Nepal Communist Party-Maoist." The central goal for the talk is to convince the Maoists to end

their efforts of creating a communist government, a struggle that has claimed more than 9,500 lives since 1996. Maoist violence increased after Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba formed the four-party coalition, Nepal's most widely backed government in two years. Farmers often support the revolution because they want to give their children a better life; they see technology in other countries but receive nothing from their own government. Ganesh Man Pun, a rebel officer, says, "Our aim is to have an autonomous people's government where people seize the power for themselves."

The Maoists have also developed their own courts, judges, taxes and school system, a system in which workers give earnings back to the rebel group. Prisoners pay for their crimes by working in farm fields or carrying supplies.

Michael Malinowsky, U.S. ambassador to Nepal said, "There is no magic wand to resolve the conflict. The goal is to bring them back to society and not to kill them. For the political solution, the constitutional forces like the king and the political parties have to work together against the violence."

CONCLUSION

The Maoist situation in Nepal remains tense and uncertain. Such a conflict is not easily resolved and may not reach its conclusion for years. In the meantime, there is hope that peaceful negotiations will be made and that a beginning of peace will soon commence. Only time will tell what is in store for the country of Nepal and its people.

* Photos c/o AP.

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