

Nepal & the Bush Administration: Into Thin Air

By Conn Hallinan | February 3, 2004

Tucked into the upper stories of the Himalayas, Nepal hardly seems ground zero for the Bush administration's next crusade against "terrorism," but an aggressive American ambassador, a strategic locale, and a flood of U.S. weaponry threatens to turn the tiny country of 25 million into a counter-insurgency bloodbath.

More than 8,000 Nepalese have died since a civil war broke out in 1996, and the death rate has sharply increased with the arrival of almost 8,400 American M-16 submachine guns, accompanied by U.S. advisers, high-tech night fighting equipment, and British helicopters.

For most Americans, Nepal, birthplace of the Buddha and home to Everest, the world's high mountain, is a charming tourist haven. For the native Nepalese, 42% of whom, according to the World Bank, live below the poverty line, Nepal is a land enchained by caste, riven with ethnic rivalries, and dominated by a feudal landlord class.

The central protagonists in the current war are King Gyanendra, who abolished an elected parliament last year, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPNM), which is leading a rural insurrection, and a group of five political parties that found themselves out in the cold when the monarchy took over.

The Bush administration has concluded that the civil war threatens to make Nepal a "failed state" and a haven for international terrorists, leading it to place the CPNM on the State Department's "Watch List," along with organizations like al Qaeda, Abu Sayyaf, and Lebanon's Hezbollah.

U.S. Ambassador to Nepal, Michael E. Malinowski, compares CPNM leader, Baburam Bhattarai, to Nazi propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels. Malinowski, whose track record includes service in Afghanistan and Pakistan, advocates an all-out military offensive aimed at the insurgency, and recently told the *New York Times* that the CPNM, "literally have to be bent back to the table."

But it was the Nepalese government's attempt to crush rural unrest that sparked the civil war in the first place, and virtually no one thinks there is a military solution to the insurrection. "The government forces, under the present policies, could win a couple of battles here and there," writes analyst Romeet Kaul Watt in *The Kashmir Tribune*, "but will never win the war."

Roots of War

The present war finds its roots in both the ongoing poverty of a nation that is 85% rural, and the failure of the government to institute land reform measures following the restoration of representative government in 1990.

King Mahendra, father of the present King, dismissed an elective government in 1960. He ruled until his death in 1972, when his son, King Birendra, took over, and eventually restored democracy. But when conditions did not improve in rural areas, peasants began agitating against onerous rents. The government responded by sending the military into the countryside—Operation Romeo and Operation Kilo Sera II—that did little more than radicalize poor farmers and recruit members for the CPNM.

The war, like most civil wars, has been brutal. While most of the civilian deaths are attributed to government forces, Amnesty International accuses both sides of "unlawful criminal deaths." The CPNM has assassinated government supporters and police, and occasionally bombed Kathmandu. The government has "disappeared" opponents, razed villages, and executed CPNM members and their supporters.

Over the past two years the Royal Nepal Army has beefed itself up to 72,000, but it isn't large enough to win a war against the CPNM's 4,000 core members and 15,000 or so militia supporters. In any case, most of the Army is concentrated near the capital, Kathmandu.

However, with the recent influx of U.S. M-16s, Belgium FAL submachine guns, and British helicopters, the army has grown more aggressive, and death rates have climbed. A government massacre of 19 villagers set off the latest round of fighting. In the first month following the collapse of a seven-month cease-fire, civilian deaths tripled. According to the Nepal human rights group, Informal Sector Service Centre, 800 of the 1,100 deaths since the end of the cease fire have been inflicted by government forces.

A major culprit in the escalating death rate is the appearance of modern assault rifles, the real "Weapons of Mass Destruction."

Since 1990, more than five million people have died in wars around the globe, upwards of 90% of them from AK-47s, M-16s, FALs, German G3s, and Israeli Uzis. According to the Red Cross, more than 60% of civilian casualties are caused by submachine guns, and the United Nations Development Program estimates that small arms kill 300,000 people a year.

Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF)



Modern assault rifles are far more deadly than the previous generations of weapons because they combine rapid-fire power with high velocity ammunition. The combination of “Rounds Per Minute” (RPM)—the AK-47 delivers 600 RPMs, the M-16 up to 950 RPMs—and the enormous speed of the bullets, is a deadly one. Fatalities from wounds have skyrocketed, particularly in places where medical care is primitive. At \$13.3 billion a year, the U.S. is the number one arms dealer in the world, far ahead of the Russians (\$5 billion) and the French (\$1 billion). The bulk of that—\$8.6 billion—goes to developing countries like Nepal.

Small, Savage Wars

But efforts to curb the small arms trade have met with stiff resistance. A recent proposal by Canada to ban the sale of small arms to “non-state actors” was derailed by the Americans, who have used such forces as an extension of foreign policy in places like Afghanistan and Central America.

Our ally in this war hardly fits the alleged aim of promoting democracy the Bush administration talks so much about. One of King Gyanendra’s first acts was to dismiss the elected government of Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Dueda for alleged “incompetence.”

Kathmandu has been the focus of demands for democracy and the reinstatement of parliament ever since, including one demonstration that drew 8,000 in late December. The Nepalese daily, *Rajdhani*, reported Jan. 25 that the five political parties had thrown their support behind a growing student movement demanding a republic. According to *Rajdhani*, “The parties decided to support protests of women, labourers, farmers, intellectuals, and different professional organizations as well.”

Krishna Sitaula, central committee member of the Nepal Congress Party, warned that the attempt by the King to impose an autocracy would backfire and hinted that the insurrection in the countryside and the protests in the cities might have common ground. “Right now, the country is moving towards a republic,” he said, adding, “Maoists will give up violence and join us in the movement.” Whether the CPNM would actually do that remains unclear.

The U.S. has once again aligned itself with absolutism in its war on “terror,” a war that is not only costing Nepalese lives, but has wrecked the economy and tanked the lucrative tourist trade. For the second year in a row, the Nepalese economy shrank.

It is also heating up an area of the world with explosive potential. Nepal borders both India and China (Tibet). Both generally support the royalist forces, but neither is too happy about the growing U.S. involvement.

According to the *Asia Times*, last summer Indian Foreign Secretary Kanwai Sibal warned against “outside assistance” to Nepal, and the Indian press is grumbling about the U.S. ignoring a 1950 Friendship agreement—one that greatly favored India—between New Delhi and Kathmandu. Publicly India and China have soft-pedaled their opposition to U.S. intervention, but if the war expands, it could spill over into both countries. Tibet is restless under Beijing’s rule, and northern India has a number of long-standing separatist movements.

According to the *New York Times*, the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) is exploring ways to add another \$14 million in “insurgency relevant” aid to the \$17 million in current U.S. military aid. AID was one of the main funnels for the U.S. government’s support for the South Vietnamese regime.

While it seems a stretch to compare Vietnam to Nepal, replace “terrorism” with “Communism,” and the parallels are disturbingly similar. In his book “In Retrospect,” former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara admitted that the U.S. was “wrong, terribly wrong,” about Vietnam. He recently told Doug Saunders of the *Globe & Mail* (Canada) pretty much the same thing about the U.S. in Iraq: “It’s just wrong what we’re doing. It’s morally wrong, it’s politically wrong, it’s economically wrong.”

One can only hope that 30 years from now we don’t read similar words about U.S. intervention in Nepal.

(Conn Hallinan <connm@cats.ucsc.edu> is a provost at the University of California at Santa Cruz and a political analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus (online at www.fpif.org.)

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2004. All rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

“A Think Tank Without Walls”

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0402nepal.html>

p. 2

www.fpif.org

A Think Tank Without Walls

