

Nepal—Nursing the Pinion

By Conn Hallinan | February 15, 2005

While the U.S., India, and Great Britain have sharply condemned the Feb. 1 coup by King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah of Nepal, the policies of those three governments vis-à-vis the ongoing civil war in the Himalayan nation must share considerable blame for the present crisis. Declaring a state of emergency, the King placed the leaders of Nepal's political parties, as well as Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, under house arrest. Gyanendra also suspended constitutional rights to freedom of speech, assembly, and a free press, and authorized preventive detention.

The purported rationale for the takeover was the inability of the Deuba government to end the nine-year insurgency by the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPNM) and the failure to organize parliamentary elections. Nepal has not had a parliament since the king dissolved it in 2002. But the real reason appears to be a chimera, a fantasy that the government can win a military victory over the CPNM.

It is an illusion fueled in large part by an avalanche of modern weaponry, plus military training that has poured into the country from India, the U.S., and Britain. More than 12,000 U.S. M-16s, 5,000 Belgium FLN sub-machine guns, and some 20,000 rifles from India have filled the arms coffers of the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) since 2001. Britain has added helicopters armed with machine guns and rockets. The size of the RNA has grown from 50,000 to 73,000 and is due to reach 80,000 next year. If one counts the police, Royalist forces now number 138,000. While the insurgent forces are small—4,000 core soldiers and about 15,000 supporters—virtually no independent observers believe the central government can defeat them, because the roots of the war are in the social and economic poverty of the nation.

Poverty and Violence

Nepal is the 12th poorest country in the world, where, according to the World Bank, 42% of the population lives below the poverty line. The Asian Development Bank estimates that the annual national income is just \$241 per capita.

The civil war, which has claimed some 11,000 lives, has been an ugly one, the brutality of which has sharply escalated with the recent influx of arms and counterinsurgency training. Over 800 people died this past December alone.

According to Amnesty International, there has also been a "dramatic escalation" in the number of "disappearances," some 378 in just the past year, more than in the previous five years combined. Amnesty has called on government security forces to halt the practice and to stop blocking investigations into the disappearances by the courts and Nepal's Human Rights Commission. Amnesty also charges widespread use of torture and extrajudicial executions by the RNA and the police.

While the majority of deaths have come at the hands of government forces, both sides engage in murder and intimidation, and the CPNM has been accused of forced recruiting in the countryside.

The Feb. 1 coup was roundly denounced by the king's foreign allies. "These developments constitute a serious setback to the cause of democracy in Nepal and cannot but be a cause of grave concern for India," said a statement by India's foreign ministry shortly after the takeover. India also pulled out of a meeting of the South Asian Assn. for Regional Cooperation in Dhaka to protest the coup, effectively torpedoing the summit. U.S. State Department spokesman, Richard Boucher, said the Bush administration was "deeply troubled by the apparent step back from democracy," and called for an "immediate move toward restoring of multiparty democratic institutions." The British government expressed similar sentiments.

But while the King's allies appeared genuinely distressed at this latest development, it should hardly come as a surprise. Back in early December, *The Economist* was predicting a coup and provided a virtual blueprint for what happened on Feb. 1. Citing the arming and training of the RNA by India and the U.S., the editors wrote:

This (the foreign military aid) helps contain the Maoist threat. But it also bolsters those in the king's camp who think that a military victory is possible and might be easier if the trappings of democracy were jettisoned. The information minister, seen as the king's man in the cabinet, has dropped hints of a more 'authoritarian' government. Many human-rights activists and politicians in Kathmandu expect the king and the army to assume more direct power and, blaming the war, suspend many civil liberties.

On Feb. 4, Reuters reported that the RNA Chief of Staff said the coup was aimed at forcing the Maoist insurgents back to the negotiating table. As the arrest of trade union and political leaders continued in Kathmandu, the army chief said, "Now we can solely go after the Maoists in a single-minded manner

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without having to worry about what's going to happen on the streets, people's agitation." The comment on how to negotiate with the Maoists echoed a statement made last year by former U.S. Ambassador Michael Malinowski that the CPNM "literally have to be bent back to the table."

War On Terror Redux?

The Bush administration sees the Nepal insurgency as another domino in its international war on terrorism, arguing that the country could become a "failed state" and hence a haven for terrorists. The CPNM has been placed on the State Department's "Watch List," along with Al-Qaida, Abu Sayyaf, and Hezbollah.

While the White House claims this is about "terrorism," there are suspicions in the region that American involvement is also part of an overall U.S. plan to ring China with military bases and regimes friendly, or at least beholden, to Washington.

India is deeply involved in Nepal, in part because Nepal borders long-time adversary China, in part because of its own internal "war on terrorism." India has stepped up counter-insurgency operations against what it calls "Naxalites" (India's term for Maoist or communist insurgents) in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh. In a speech last year, former Indian Home Minister Lai Krishna Advani said, "Maoists of Nepal are trying to create trouble in India and the central government will initiate immediate steps to launch a stringent action to end existing relations between the Maoists of Nepal and the Indian Naxalites."

While it is true that Nepal Maoists occasionally use India as a haven, there is no evidence of any serious cooperation or coordination between any of these groups. The Indian insurgencies are driven more by local conditions than by any pan-Indian collusion with Nepal Maoists. And in any case, the groups don't share a common ideology, political program, or even goals. The right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), of which Advani was a founder, went down to defeat in the last Indian election, but there is no indication that New Delhi has altered its policies vis-à-vis Nepal or its own internal insurgent movements.

India recently arrested Mohan Vaidya in Darjeeling, West Bengal, the number three person in the CPNM, and turned him over to the Kathmandu authorities. The CPNM retaliated by attacking some Indian-owned oil tankers near the Uttar

Pradesh border, and trying to whip up a nationalist campaign that India intends to invade Nepal. The Maoists have even been building fortified trenches on the border to repel such an invasion, although it is a very unlikely scenario.

Next Steps

The Feb. 1 coup puts the King firmly back in power, which will undoubtedly ramp up the war in the countryside. However, besides adding to the list of dead, wounded, and disappeared, such escalation is unlikely to alter the present stalemate. Breaking that deadlock will be almost impossible unless two things happen:

An immediate embargo on arms and training for the RNA by the U.S., India, and Britain. While Washington and New Delhi warn that such an embargo could mean victory for the CPNM, no serious independent analyst thinks that the Maoists can overthrow the government by force of arms;

Mediation by either independent parties, or the UN.

Some Scandinavian nations have already proposed UN intervention, as has the Asian Human Rights Commission. In a recent statement, the Hong Kong-based rights group said, "If no serious intervention is made at this stage by the United Nations and the international community to stop the escalation of violence, a bloodbath could easily take place while the movement of the people and news is restricted."

It is a step the Maoists favor, but which the U.S. and the Indians oppose. The former do so because of the Bush administration's reflexive hostility to the world body; the Indians because they fear external mediation might be used to address their own insurgent movements and the ongoing crisis in Kashmir.

These countries have intervened in Nepal's civil war for reasons having to do with their own internal affairs, foreign policy strategies, and political ideologies, not because any of them are overly concerned with the welfare of the Nepalese. In the name of a jihad on "terrorism," or paranoia about their own internal insurgents, they have nursed the pinion of military aid. Can they really be surprised when that pinion finally impels the steel of a military coup?

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