

The Terror In Nepal

By Maura Moynihan

Tuesday, May 7, 2002; Page A21

Since 1996, when Maoist rebels began their assault on the fledgling democracy in Nepal, some 3,000 Nepalis have been murdered. Rebels now control more than half the countryside. An impoverished rural populace is daily terrorized by gang rapes, abductions, mutilations and beheadings.

Last June Nepal's King Bhirendra and members of his family were massacred during a palace dinner. The family killings left the nation in a state of shock, which, predictably, emboldened the Maoists to penetrate the Katmandu Valley, and the war has been raging since. Even as Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba prepared to meet here today with President Bush, the government in the past few days has been carrying out a major offensive that it claims has taken the lives of several hundred rebels.

Although no foreigners have been harmed in Nepal's turmoil, tourism -- the country's primary source of foreign exchange -- has been crippled, leaving millions of Nepalis without employment.

For years Nepal has been ignored by journalists and policymakers, earning only occasional headlines when intrepid mountaineers are stranded on Everest. But the collapse of law and order has perilous consequences for the whole of South Asia. Since Mao Zedong's annexation of the Tibetan plateau in 1951, Nepal has been one of the most critical and effective buffer states in Asia, poised between the world's two most populous nations, Communist China and democratic India.

What do the Maoists want? Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, convener of the United Revolutionary People's Council of Nepal, recently issued this statement: "By ideological persuasion, we are for the ultimate withering away of all national boundaries and the creation of a classless and stateless global community, to smash the moribund parasitic classes of the arch-reactionary Shah-Rana family and their close courtiers."

One would think this sort of Stalinoid cant had long ago been rendered obsolete, but the grimly familiar 20th century phenomenon of socialist zealots who justify a reformist agenda with a rigid ideology -- and enforce it with psychotic brutality -- is spreading like a virus through this fragile Himalayan nation, raising a threat to the delicate regional balance of power.

A nation of radically diverse ethnic groups, Nepal has a remarkable tradition of cultural and religious tolerance. For four decades it has granted sanctuary and citizenship to refugees from Tibet and has preserved fragments of many ancient Himalayan civilizations. In 1990 the late King Bhirendra restrained the army and welcomed a democratic revolution, unlike his neighbor Deng Xiaoping. Yet Nepal receives little recognition, or support, for these achievements.

In the past decade, while struggling to restructure a medieval feudal social order with democratic institutions, Nepal has seen its population soar to 25 million (about 6 million more than Australia) without a parallel growth in education and jobs. A young, disenfranchised populace is vulnerable to crime, sex trafficking, smuggling and international terrorist operations.

In December 1999 an Indian Airlines flight originating in Katmandu was hijacked to Kandahar in Afghanistan. The plane was returned to New Delhi after the release of several terrorists in Indian custody, including Omar Sheik, who recently took credit for the abduction and murder of journalist Daniel Pearl. Many Katmandu residents fear that if the Maoist insurgency goes unchecked, Nepal could become a base for larger terrorist networks operating throughout Asia.

On Feb. 20, one week after 200 people were slaughtered by Maoists in western Nepal, Prime Minister Deuba stated: "I appeal to the international community to give us your support at this time of crisis. We announced our firm support for the U.S. coalition against terrorism from the moment the U.S. asked for that support. I cannot believe that the U.S. war against terrorism was meant for terrorism only in Afghanistan."

Investing in nation-building in Nepal at this critical hour would be a less costly measure than providing military assistance in the aftermath of future carnage.

The writer has worked with refugees in India and Nepal for many years.

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