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Dark Days in Shangri-La

By SAMRAT UPADHYAY

In the 60's Nepal was a hashish-filled Shangri-La for hippies. In the 80's its hills swarmed with trekkers catching the evening sun as it hit Annapurna. Now a more sinister show is playing in the villages and in the capital, Katmandu -- and it should make Americans worry.

For seven years, Maoist rebels have been waging a "people's war" that has turned this once-peaceful nation of 25 million, Lord Buddha's birthplace, into a killing field with thousands dead. In language that frighteningly invokes Pol Pot's Cambodia, they've vowed to kill millions more and "hoist the hammer and sickle atop Mount Everest." In August, after a seven-month cease-fire that allowed them to regroup, the Maoists began striking fiercely, and most Nepalis fear what will happen if they win.

If Nepal turns into a Maoist totalitarian state, it could alter the security balance throughout South Asia. In this geopolitically important area, already rent by nuclear-fueled one-upmanship between India and Pakistan, this is a risk the world cannot afford.

The Maoists have already formed close alliances with leftist extremists in the Indian states of West Bengal and Sikkim; the rebels often hide over the border in northern India, and the Indian government has made little effort to crack down on them. There are reports of cooperation with Communist factions from the Philippines, Peru and Turkey. The rebels model their approach after Peru's murderous Shining Path guerrilla movement: voice the aspirations of the poor, fight state oppression and police brutality, use violence as a means to justice.

The rebels apparently see no paradox in their clinging to the revolutionary doctrines of Mao Zedong, even as his heirs in Beijing show an interest in helping the Nepali government defeat the insurrection. They also openly admire the late North Korean dictator Kim Il Sung, and could turn Nepal into another Hermit Kingdom: isolated, bitter and in constant friction with its neighbors.

And at a time when the United States could do without more adversaries, the virulently anti-American stance of the Maoists could turn Nepal into a breeding ground -- not unlike Taliban-era Afghanistan -- for those who want to strike back at the great "imperialist" nation in retaliation for real or imaginary injuries.

When they began their insurgency eight years ago, the Maoists -- with their promise of land reforms, free education and universal health care -- garnered support from rural Nepalis suffering from decades of extreme poverty, illiteracy and caste and ethnic prejudice. Even urban elites saw them as an antidote to the failed leadership of corrupt and querulous political parties. But as the Maoists began snuffing innocent lives and calling it "collateral damage," public sentiment has largely turned against them.

Since 1995 the Maoists, with their 8,000 regular troops and perhaps as many as 40,000 irregular fighters, have been conducting sneak attacks against police and army posts, blowing up bridges, and publicly beheading alleged enemies and spies.

Tourism, a mainstay of the Nepali economy, has been hit hard, as have primary sources of foreign exchange like textile and carpet manufacturing. "Business people are scared of the Maoists, who appear relentless in their efforts to destroy factories by setting them on fire," said Ashutosh Tiwari, a business consultant in Katmandu. "They rob banks, call for nationwide strikes and extort money -- called a 'Maoist tax' -- from business people."

The public is caught in the middle of the civil war. Last month four schoolchildren were killed in the crossfire between the army and the Maoists. In the past two years more than 5,000 people -- army, Maoists and civilians -- have died. Amnesty International has criticized the Maoists for "scores of abductions and kidnappings," but also condemned the army for arbitrary arrests and 250 cases of suspect "disappearances."

Nepal's monarchy has only compounded the problem. A year ago King Gyanendra fired the prime minister for supposed incompetence and dissolved the Parliament. For some Nepalis, this raised anxieties that the country was reverting to the repressive Panchayat regime that ran the country from 1962 to 1990 under the crown's absolute rule. Others lauded the king's "active" hand: 12 years of democracy hadn't worked, and it was time the king took control.

In traditional Nepali thought, the monarch is an incarnation of Hindu god Vishnu, preserver of life. To some extent, this hold over the people remains, although it took a blow two years ago when Crown Prince Dipendra, drunk and drugged, gunned down 10 relatives, including his father, King Birendra.

In February, Nepalis sighed with relief when the Maoists began negotiations with the government. A strident war of words, however, soon replaced dialogue, and the rebels went deeper into hiding. Their chief demand is for an assembly to redraft the Constitution, making the crown either powerless or obsolete. They also want the government to oust American military advisers and to terminate the country's counterterrorism agreement with the United States.

Nepal isn't an Islamic country, it doesn't possess nuclear weapons, and it's small. But America should treat Nepal's insurgency problem as another potential Afghanistan -- the Maoists' hard-core Communist ideology more than compensates for their lack of religious fervor. Should America intervene militarily, however, the Maoists' leader, Baburam Bhattarai, has warned of "another Vietnam." More to the point, ordinary Nepalis reject foreign interference in solving their country's problems, and the American-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have solidified Nepalis' suspicion about America's true motives.

So what can the United States do? Instead of military aid (last year Congress approved \$20 million in emergency military aid to help fight the insurgents), America should push for democratic change. King Gyanendra's executive fiat hasn't solved the Maoist problem, and his government's recent hasty appointments of party members to local administrative posts damningly resembles the pre-democratic Panchayat rule.

Rather than hoping that a firm hand will subdue the rebellion, America should make its \$27 million in annual economic aid to Nepal contingent on the king's moving toward new elections under a multiparty interim government. "Let the executive powers go back to the people," says Akhilesh Upadhyay (no relation), an editor at The Katmandu Post. As for India, Saubhagya Shah, a leading Nepalese scholar, says the United States should "convince India to shut down Maoist bases on its territory and extradite the rebel leadership."

Since the end of the cease-fire in August, more than a thousand Nepali lives have been lost. But the Maoist insurgency is not simply about terrorists: it's about the problems of a struggling democracy. These difficulties are shared with many other countries around the world, and each is a test case of America's commitment to spreading its ideals of liberty and freedom.

For years Nepalis suffered under absolute monarchy, which provided the foundation for Maoist ideologues to garner support among the oppressed. The only way out of this quagmire is more democracy, not less.

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