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Army Fires at Protesters as Nepal's Political Crisis Deepens

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The Royal Nepalese Army fired at pro-democracy protesters in an eastern town on Wednesday, as the death toll climbed to at least eight in two weeks of defiant demonstrations and the country appeared headed toward a dangerous brink.

The brink of what remained unclear.

From King Gyanendra, increasingly isolated at home and abroad, came no suggestion of whether there would be further crackdowns or concessions. A coalition of political parties, with the blessings of Maoist rebels, has called for the demonstrations, and the parties have said they will not budge until the king restores the ousted Parliament and gives up control of the government.

With the parties preparing for what they had hoped would be the biggest demonstrations so far on Thursday, the government announced a fresh 18-hour curfew on Wednesday night. Journalists, diplomats and local human rights monitors have not been issued permits to travel during the curfew.

Meanwhile, an Indian government delegation arrived Wednesday with a message to hasten a return to democracy. The Indian foreign secretary, Shyam Saran, accompanied by an Indian royal, Karan Singh, the son of the late maharaja of Kashmir, were scheduled to meet with the king on Thursday. "Our message is simply that we should try and get out of the present downward spiral," Mr. Singh said in an interview before setting off from New Delhi.

What King Gyanendra is prepared to do to ease the crisis remains a mystery. In a statement issued last week, he reiterated his call for dialogue with the political parties but did not address the protesters' demands for an end to royal control of the government, let alone respond to the calls on the street for an end to the monarchy. Nevertheless, with violent protests roiling the country for 14 straight days, there was little disagreement that the king's own actions had narrowed his options, and that he would ultimately be compelled to concede more than he would have only a few weeks ago. Doctors, lawyers, bank workers and even bureaucrats working in the Home Ministry have joined the protests.

"He has left it too late," Keith Bloomfield, the British ambassador, said Wednesday afternoon. "The sort of concessions he might have gotten away with two weeks ago are not acceptable to the parties."

Gyanendra seized control of the government in February 2005, with a promise to finish a Maoist insurgency. He clamped down on political freedoms, consolidated his rule and refused to reciprocate the rebels' cease-fire, but ultimately brought no peace. Frustrated, the seven-party

coalition struck a deal with the Maoists and called for rallies in April. What were intended to be four days of protests spread across the country. For two weeks, Nepalese violated curfews and bans on demonstrations and poured into the streets, with chants of "Burn the crown."

"The king is in serious difficulty," Mr. Bloomfield said. "He has got to make major concessions."

Indeed, whether the monarchy will survive in Nepal is anyone's guess.

The nub of the conflict between palace and politicians is what kind of power the king intends to hang on to. Even if he were to offer to hand over the government to a prime minister of his choosing, it is unlikely to quiet the agitation. After all, before assuming sole control of the government 14 months ago, the king dismissed and installed a series of prime ministers.

The political parties maintain that their bottom line is the restoration of Parliament. The palace has said nothing suggesting it would be willing to take such a step. Its only other option would be to tighten the screws further on political freedom. Parliament was suspended in May 2002, by an elected prime minister, who was in turn dismissed, appointed and dismissed again by the king.

"We are walking into a moment where the king will be forced to make a choice, forced to show his true colors," one European diplomat said, on condition of anonymity.

The Maoists, in their alliance with the political parties, have promised to admit international cease-fire monitors and to play within the rules of parliamentary democracy.

The latest violence came in the provincial town of Chandragadhi, roughly 300 miles southeast of here, when security forces opened fire on a group of protesters numbering in the tens of thousands and approaching a local government office. The Royal Nepalese Army confirmed that two people had been killed. The Defense Ministry, in a statement, said someone in the mob had fired at the security forces, injuring two police officers and prompting soldiers to open fire.

A rights monitoring group called Informal Sector Service Center, or Insec, reported 4 dead and more than 100 wounded. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights could not confirm the killings. In a statement, Kieran Dwyer, spokesman for the United Nations human rights office, said his office was "deeply concerned at these latest reports of grossly excessive use of force by security forces against demonstrators."

It was the worst violence since protests began two weeks ago, with demonstrators lobbing stones at the police, burning tires on the streets and demanding the return of parliamentary rule. The police have commonly responded by baton-whipping the demonstrators, often in the head, firing tear gas and rubber-coated bullets and arresting thousands.

On a number of occasions, the army has said it was compelled to take aim at the crowd, using live ammunition. The United Nations human rights monitors earlier this week confirmed that 10 soldiers in plain clothes, including at least one armed with a grenade, were present in a demonstration last week in western Banke district.

Among foreign diplomats, discussions have been under way to consider penalties against the royal government. These could include travel restrictions, a freeze on assets abroad, and in what would certainly pinch this country the hardest, a bar on Nepalese soldiers and police officers from partaking in lucrative United Nations peacekeeping assignments. Earlier this week, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Commission of Jurists called for a travel ban and a freeze on foreign assets of top government officials and military commanders.

The International Crisis Group on Wednesday echoed the call for penalties, urged continued pressure on the Maoists to "move towards peace" and pushed for the creation of an international cease-fire monitoring mission to usher in a peace effort.

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