

August 4, 2003

After Nepal Killings, a Tough King Gets U.S. Backing

By JOHN KIFNER

This fairy tale kingdom gone awry, perched among the world's most spectacular mountains, is once again seething with intrigue and rumor, caught in dramas involving its monarchy, its striving for democracy and outside powers.

Two years ago Nepal was shaken to its core when the royal family was all but wiped out in a murky attack that was officially attributed to Crown Prince Dipendra, who also died. Now the country is wondering whether an unsteady six-month cease-fire with Maoist guerrillas can survive during off-and-on peace negotiations.

There is an ever-shifting struggle here among three power centers: the Hindu monarchy, which has sustained the country for more than 200 years; the far weaker political parties, born in the 1990's after calls for more democracy; and the Maoists.

Fearful that Nepal could descend into chaos or become a haven for terrorists, outside powers -- the United States, Britain and India -- are pouring in aid for the government. But the United States, which is providing \$17 million to turn the parade-ground royal army into an anti-insurgent force, may find itself backing a tough king whose democratic credentials are in doubt.

King Gyanendra, a wealthy businessman, took the throne after the palace killings as a constitutional monarch of limited powers. But now he has taken full control, dismissing Parliament, putting off new elections and appointing a royalist prime minister over the objections of the major political parties.

The parties have broadly discredited themselves with corruption, ineffectiveness and revolving door governments, and they fear that the king will make a deal with the Maoists and move them even further onto the margins of power.

"What is the king's role?" Girija Prasad Koirala, leader of the large Nepali Congress Party, asked at a recent party gathering. "I conclude that these are parts of the design already reached between the king and the Maoists."

During the cease-fire, the Maoists became very public, opening an office in the capital, holding rallies and giving speeches. Then, in mid-July, the office was closed and the Maoist leaders dropped out of sight. Later, the Maoists sent a message to government mediators demanding to deal directly with the king.

"A strange phenomenon in a very strange country," a Western diplomat said.

A Nepalese journalist, Mana Ranjan Josse, said: "Seeing is not believing here. Everything is not what meets the eye."

The Maoist rebellion in the countryside has its roots in complex religious, ethnic and tribal realities, along with deep poverty -- per capita income is \$220 a year and even less in remote areas -- and the concentration of the meager resources in a few hands. About 85 percent of the 24 million mostly poor people are Hindu. The top two castes, 29 percent of the population, hold most of the government jobs.

The Shah family, which founded the Nepalese kingdom in 1768, and the Rana family, which ruled through hereditary prime ministers from 1846 to 1950 with the king as a figurehead, have so intermarried that they have formed an aristocracy that controls much of the wealth.

"The reasons for discontent are real," the Western diplomat said. But he was critical of the guerrillas nonetheless. "When the Maoists started," he said, "they got a lot of sympathy from intellectuals, but it has dissipated because of their brutality."

More than 7,000 people have been killed since the Maoists went into the jungle in 1996, and Amnesty International and other groups have recorded charges of widespread human rights abuses on both sides. The army and security forces have killed and tortured civilians, human rights groups say, while the rebels have executed local officials and teachers, blown up government aid centers and public works projects, and financed themselves with bank robberies and extortions.

Rebellion flared here in 1990 with the formation of the People's Movement, which demanded multiparty democracy. Demonstrations led to riots and some 300 protesters were killed. Finally, under foreign pressure, the royal family caved in. A new Constitution was written in 1990, intended to establish a symbolic monarchy somewhat along the lines of Britain, and an elected Parliament.

But the system has been a bitter disappointment. The new king, Gyanendra, was known to have argued in family circles against the Constitution approved by his older brother, King Birendra, who was among those killed in June 2001. King Gyanendra's extensive holdings -- some of which were reported not to have paid taxes -- include tea plantations, hotels and a cigarette factory.

Last October, the new king dismissed the government in a proclamation assailing its "incompetence" and appointed his own prime minister. He cited Article 127 of the Constitution, which outlines the monarch's "power to remove difficulties."

But Devendra Raj Panday, a former minister who helped write the Constitution, says Article 127 does not empower the king in that way. "The king has trampled all over the Constitution," he said. "We are in for more difficult times."

Ganesh Raj Sharma, a leading constitutional lawyer, took a similar view. "Actually, in fact, it's against the Constitution," he said. "But if you ask the common people in the street, they think the king is a kind of god, and that belief is the strength of the king."

Fearing instability in this volatile corner of the world, the United States, Britain and India appear to be banking on the king.

The United States, American officials said, is increasing development grants to Nepal -- to \$38 million a year from \$24 million -- with the money financing projects that the officials termed "insurgency relevant."

Defense aid, the officials said, is jumping from "a couple of hundred thousand a year" to \$17 million in order to transform an army that is short of everything from boots to helicopters. The army is to be expanded -- to 70,000 troops from 50,000 -- and is said to have bought 5,000 M-16 rifles from the United States and 5,500 machine guns from Belgium.

"This king is tougher than his brother," the Western diplomat said. "He knows if he's not successful, it will be the end of his line."

That view was echoed by Mr. Josse, the journalist, who is said to be close to the royal family. "Birendra was like the classical Hamlet, in all fairness: too kind-hearted, not decisive," he said. "This guy is the smarter one and more decisive. And he has a strong sense of history as well."

The American role, in particular, has drawn criticism from the rebels, who in their latest statement charged that aid from the United States was converting the Royal Nepalese Army into the Royal American Army.

The Maoist leaders are from the highest Brahmin class, and the guerrillas, many of them teenagers, are recruited from the same hill tribes as the army. Lately, they have dropped their initial demand that the monarchy be abolished. Their current position calls for an interim government, round-table discussions over Nepal's future and an eventual constitutional convention.

"The scenario is really bleak," said Bishnu Raj Upreti, a conflict management expert. "The real problem is discrimination, injustice, poverty, bad governance. The role of the international community should be to put positive pressure to the king, to the Maoists, to the government, but that is not happening."

He added: "I do not sincerely believe the king is committed to multiparty democracy. The role of America is, in that sense, very unfortunate."