

## The History and Dynamics of Nepal's Maoist Revolt

*Washington-area professionals gathered on March 18th for the fifteenth IRG Discussion Forum, "The History and Dynamics of Nepal's Maoist Revolt," led by independent consultant and conflict specialist Robert Gersony. Mr. Gersony briefed forum participants on his conclusions drawn from in-depth, private consultations in mid-2003 with 250 individuals, including 150 local residents of Nepal's most conflict-affected mid-western region.*

In 1951, the king of Nepal led a palace coup that ended the century-old system of rule by hereditary premiers and instituted a cabinet system of government. Reforms in 1990 established a multiparty democracy within the framework of a constitutional monarchy. In 2001, the Crown Prince killed ten members of the Royal family, including the King and Queen, and then took his own life; the country is now governed by the new King and his appointed cabinet. In 1996, Maoist guerrillas based in remote western Nepal began an intensive campaign to replace the country's monarchy with their own one-party state.

### The Rise of the Maoists

The anti-government resentment felt by residents of the Maoist heartland in Rolpa and Rukum Districts of western Nepal has its

roots in a long history of isolation, neglect, and mismanaged encounters with government authorities. The area is heavily forested, mountainous, thinly populated, and entirely without roads. It is so isolated—linguistically as well as geographically—that even the Magar people, the largest ethnic group in the area, speak a dialect unintelligible to Magars elsewhere in the country.

Thirty years ago, this region was considered the most prosperous area in the western hills. Beginning in the 1930s and throughout the 1970s, its residents were

the country's principle producers of hashish, which afforded them a comfortable livelihood. When the government prohibited the production, distribution, and sale of hashish in 1976, not only was it the first inkling on the part of locals that the product was illegal, it was the first substantive action of the remote Kathmandu government to affect them directly. At the same time, other traditional sources of livelihood—sheep herding, iron mining, and service in the British Gurkha military—were also

declining, and the area fell into grinding poverty.

This economic decline was followed by other unfortunate interactions with the central authorities. One of these involved a small group of Christians. Conversion is considered a crime in Nepal, the world's only Hindu kingdom, and nine of the converts were sentenced to a year in prison. Money collected to support their families was used to build a water mill, the area's first economic

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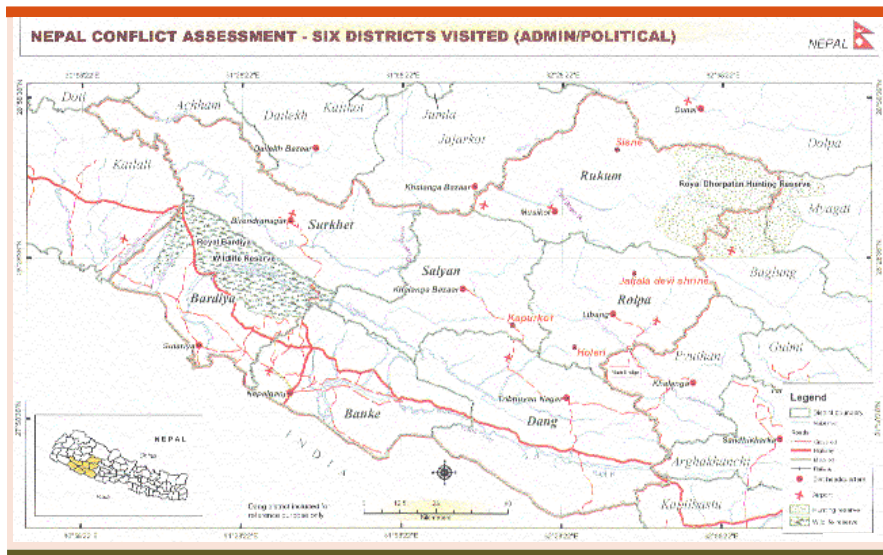
*Despite the justified grievances of the 55 percent of Nepal's population who are low caste and ethnic minorities, Mr. Gersony's research indicates that the Maoists have failed to win their support.*

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development project, which benefited the entire community. In 1984, police officers who came to shut the mill down because it allegedly usurped the role of the King were ambushed and publicly humiliated by the community-at-large. Although this confrontation was defused and the mill was permitted to continue to operate, the incident was seen as another example of government interference with the people's livelihoods.

Government attempts to provide development assistance to the area

## The Maoist Heartland in Western Nepal



also back-fired. In 1980, a small airport constructed in an impractical location in southeastern Rolpa was abandoned almost immediately. A hospital built in the 1990s suffered a similar fate: When the government refused to pay the contractors because of a few minor, easily correctable deficiencies, the buildings were vandalized and the hospital was also shut down.

Added to these economic setbacks, the crucial catalyst of a sustained, fifty-year Communist Party presence exclusively in this area interpreted events and exploited grievances to promote the Party's agenda. This later provided the Maoists their major political and geographic base, which was further strengthened when the People's War, launched in February 1996, was unmet by government army opposition until November 2001. During this time, the Maoists were able to attract more recruits and expand their operations throughout the country.

### Research Methodology

Last year, Mr. Bob Gersony conducted a study of the impact of the Maoist movement in Nepal,

focusing on the six mid-western districts most affected by the uprising. The report was conducted on behalf of the non-governmental organization Mercy Corps and financed by the U. S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Mr. Gersony spoke with a total of 250 individuals; these discussions were almost always conducted one-on-one, in a private environment, and averaged two to three hours each, although some ran as long as seven hours. His conclusions are drawn from these consultations and touch on the:

- ◆ History and root causes of the insurgency;
- ◆ Conduct and influence of the Maoists and the attitude of local residents of the areas in which they are concentrated;
- ◆ Intersection of development programs with the conflict's origins;
- ◆ Government's conduct of the counter-insurgency campaign;

- ◆ Role of local, democratically elected officials.

## Summary of the Findings

### Political Dissatisfaction Not the Cause

Despite legitimate grievances of the 55 percent of Nepal's population who are low caste and ethnic minorities, the Maoists have failed to win the support of all but a fraction of them. Disillusion with multi-party democracy was not found to be a core cause of the conflict. While interviewees offered criticisms of the national government, they remain strongly attracted to the ideals of freedom of expression and choice in the election of local representatives. They view multi-party democracy, with all its faults, as the only viable alternative to what they described as the twin autocracies of the old feudal system and the Maoist program, neither of which they feel offer them freedom or hope for the future.

Election irregularities, persecution of opposing political parties, or early government attempts to control the Maoist movement in

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Rolpa and Rukum also do not hold up as core causes of the uprising according to Gersony's findings.

District elections held in 1991–1992, while marred by a few incidents of violence, were essentially fair, as evidenced by the fact that the Jana Morcha Party, from which the Maoists emerged,

prevailed in most of the contests in the area.

Operation Romeo, a police campaign initiated in November 1995 and conducted largely in Rolpa District, may have reinforced the negative image of Nepal's police, but did not involve mass killings, rape, or property destruction. There were no documented cases of death in connection with the operation, and

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*The Maoists still have the ability to hold Nepal's economic progress hostage.*

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human rights sources described the incidents of police rape as a series of individual criminal acts rather than an attempt to systematically degrade the Magar race. Moreover, the People's War, which clearly required an extended period of preparation, was declared just months after Operation Romeo began.

### **Mass Destruction Unfounded**

The Maoists have not, as has been alleged, done systematic, wholesale damage to civilian infrastructure—95 percent of infrastructure has not been affected by the uprising. However, the Maoists have attacked symbols of government authority and communication and transport systems in areas that already suffer an endemic infrastructure deficit. Interviewees found no justification for this damage to scarce development facilities, whose construction was the core of the communities' political agendas.

### **Isolation Aids the Maoists**

Maoists have firm control over about 1 percent of Nepal's territory, all in Rolpa and Rukum Districts,

and accounts from residents suggest that this area is relatively impenetrable to the Royal Nepal Army (RNA). Outside this area, the absence of sustained government security permits a Maoist presence, but reports suggest that the RNA could occupy virtually any location it chose and stay as long as it wished. What has been described as Maoist "control" over vast rural areas of the country appears, therefore, to be exaggerated. The isolation and inaccessibility of so many of Nepal's villages aids them in maintaining the illusion of control.

### **Impact on Development Programs**

In his interviews, Mr. Gersony heard frequent criticism of the Maoists' refusal to allow new development projects or the completion of projects already begun. According to those interviewed, the Maoists refuse to permit the construction of government-financed roads or water systems. Non-governmental organization development programs involving integrated infrastructure and technical assistance, community-based forest initiatives, and efforts to enhance local governments have been made unwelcome in the Maoist areas of influence. Development activities undertaken

by the Maoists themselves were described as mostly consisting of shrines, resting places, and triumphal gates dedicated to Maoist martyrs. Interviewees added that coercion rather than voluntary community mobilization usually provided the labor for these undertakings.

An overlay of a map of the country reveals that Maoists are barely present in areas where USAID's Rapti Integrated Development Project was most successful. Where there was absence of major roads, the project was less successful and the Maoists became more influential. Another development initiative that the speaker credits with preventing violent conflict decades ago, and which even today deprives the Maoists of a unifying national political issue, was the malaria eradication program that opened up the Terai belt to settlement, relieving population and land pressures in the hills.

The report indicates that the Maoists have carried out no substantial collectivization initiatives in the six districts surveyed. In most cases, landlord-sharecropper relationships have been maintained, with the Maoists collecting the landlord's share of the crop. In almost all areas where they are present, the Maoists have also imposed a tax consisting of 10 to 20 kilos of grain from each of two

### **About the Speaker**

Mr. Bob Gersony has 25 years of experience conducting field-based assessment and analysis of conflict, post-conflict, disaster and post-disaster environments working in large part for USAID, the U.S. State Department, and on occasion for the United Nations. Mr. Gersony has led post-conflict studies in Bosnia, Somalia, Uganda, Rwanda, Liberia, Chad/Sudan, West Bank/Gaza, Albania, Honduras, Ecuador, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Panama. Additionally, he has worked on natural disaster assessment and recovery in Guatemala, Dominica, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, and the Caribbean.

## For More Information...

Hard copies of Mr. Gersony's report, *Sowing the Wind ... History and Dynamics of the Maoist Revolt in Nepal's Rapti Hills*, may be requested from Ms. Gloria Allen (gallen@usaid.gov), as long as supplies last. The report also is available for downloading at [www.mercycorps.org](http://www.mercycorps.org)

Informal Sector Service Center: [www.insec.org.np](http://www.insec.org.np)

U.S. Department of State Background Notes/Nepal: [dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/bgnotes/sa/nepal9501.html](http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/bgnotes/sa/nepal9501.html)

yearly harvests. In an area where most families produce only enough to feed their families for three to six months a year, interviewees perceived this required "donation" as significant. A 5 percent tax on the monthly salaries of teachers and health workers has also been imposed.

## Ending the Conflict

Mr. Gersony's findings suggest that the Maoists are unlikely to prevail; as an indication of their political weakness, he cites the fact that they

have been unable to fully capitalize on the political vacuum created when the Parliament and local elected bodies were dissolved in mid-2002. Other indications of their probable inability to maintain the uprising over the long term are the facts that the Indian government is tightening up its borders, reducing Maoist access to arms and sanctuary there; that the Chinese government repudiates them and refuses any support; and that in the post-9/11 environment, the Maoist pledge to make Nepal an asylum for revolutionaries of all kinds has made all democratic governments more sensitive to the threat they pose.

Despite the Royal Nepal Army's increasing effectiveness in combating Maoist forces, Mr. Gersony's findings also indicate that the

conflict is not likely to be concluded through military means alone. A political track, including re-enfranchising local elected officials who were removed from power in 2002, and seizing on any serious opportunities for negotiation that may arise, will be important elements of its final resolution. Economic development and, in particular, the construction of roads to support that development and facilitate communication in rural areas is also seen as crucial.

Free and fair elections will require that the Maoists be disarmed and an extended cooling-off period provided in advance. It will also be important for military discipline to be strictly enforced and human rights protected by Nepalese government forces.

In the meantime, however, the Maoists still have the ability to hold Nepal's economic progress hostage.

## ARE THE MAOISTS THE NEXT KHMER ROUGE?

Although they subscribe to the strategies of China's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, as did the Khmer Rouge, the Maoists' conduct in Nepal has been significantly different from that of the Cambodian regime. Overall, the level of violence against civilians has been much lower, and the Nepalese Maoists have implemented none of the radical social and economic policies instituted by the Khmer Rouge. More importantly, Nepal's Maoists lack a unifying national

issue around which to mobilize a larger movement, such as the attempt to restore Prince Sihanouk provided the Khmer Rouge. However, Mr. Gersony points out that the Khmer Rouge also interacted in a friendly manner with rural populations early on, becoming more violent in the imposition of their policies only when they had sufficient power to do so. The question of the ultimate aims of Nepal's Maoists, therefore, remains a legitimate concern.

## About the IRG Discussion Forum

The IRG Discussion Forum, a monthly event hosted by Henri-Claude Bailly (chairman of IRG's Board of Advisors), addresses issues affecting international development. Each session is informal, with guest speakers and attendees participating in a personal capacity. For comments, questions, or information on the Discussion Forum, contact [discussionforum@irgltd.com](mailto:discussionforum@irgltd.com) or call IRG at 202-289-0100.

### 2004 Schedule

April 15	Middle East Oil
May 20	Institutional Justice and Rule of Law
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