

Nepali regime steps up oppression of Maoists and civilians

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Bloody clashes have erupted in Nepal between guerrilla fighters of the Communist Party of Nepal- Maoist (CPN-M) and state forces as a military-police offensive launched by the Kathmandu regime against CPN-M enters its fourth month.

After taking the upper hand in the offensive, government forces faced a major attack last Saturday night when Maoist guerillas raided the Nepal Achham district state headquarters in the town of Mangalsen, 375 kilometres from Kathmandu, killing 49 policemen. They also killed 48 Nepal Royal Army soldiers deployed in the town. Rebels attacked a small airport in the nearby town of Sanphebga, killing another 27 policemen. With later casualties, the death toll has risen to 142, including five civilians.

The CPN-M is trying to make a comeback after suffering massive repression when the government started the offensive at the end of November last year. The party has called for a general strike this Friday and Saturday to mark the sixth anniversary of its insurgency.

King Gaynendra Bikram and Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's Nepal Congress Party (NCP) government stepped up the repression after last weekend's attack. On Wednesday, the defence ministry reported that 46 Maoists had been killed in four western districts including Achham, after the government sent in additional forces. Two more rebels were killed in southwestern areas, the statement said.

On Thursday, the Nepalese parliament passed an extension of its draconian emergency laws with a large majority in the 205-member house. In Nepal, the monarchy still holds wide powers but parliament has to ratify its emergency declarations every three months.

In this case, there were no difficulties. Though the opposition Stalinist and bourgeois parties had been bickering with the government over its misuse of emergency powers, they rallied behind it after last Saturday's attack on government forces. The government has also committed itself to spend millions of dollars to buy new weapons and attack helicopters.

The government offensive commenced last November when four-month-long talks with the CPN-M broke down. The talks had begun last July after Prime Minister Deuba took office following the ousting of NCP president G.P. Koirala. Deuba promised peace talks with the CPN-M which controlled most of the country's hill districts. Both sides agreed to a ceasefire and when talks began in August they issued a joint statement saying the negotiations had been held in a "cordial atmosphere."

But the situation changed after September 11. The government banned all public rallies, with the specific aim of blocking a CPN-M rally scheduled for September 21, and refused to make any concessions. This led to a resumption of hostilities.

Since November 26, the Kathmandu regime has assumed extensive power of arrest, detention and punishment under emergency laws and banned all protests. CPN-M members, or anyone directly or indirectly helping them, are declared to be terrorists and liable to a life sentence or capital punishment.

With military aid from India and open encouragement from the Bush administration, the government has insisted it will end the NCP-M's six-year insurgency. But the Kathmandu regime has a wider agenda. It is out to crush unrest among the rural poor.

The 50,000 strong Nepal Royal Army (RNA) and the police, assisted by Indian helicopter gun-ships, have been deployed for the repressive operation. According to a parliamentary report by Home Minister Devendra Raj on February 5, "at least 398 people, including civilians, have been killed since the imposition of the emergency." Some 10,800 people affiliated with the Maoists have surrendered. Of the 5,850 people arrested, 3,283 were released after investigations while cases against 1,150 have been filed, the report said. An army report issued on February 18 claimed that 500 Maoists had been killed so far.

Strict censorship makes it difficult to provide a true picture of the scale of repression. Nevertheless, there is evidence that a large number of people may have been killed, Maoist fighters and civilians alike.

The Informal Sector Service Centre, a non-governmental organisation, said that the number of deaths was 619 by December 26. According to reports, poor peasants, mainly members of the so-called "people's governments" set up by the CPN-M in villages under their control, were among those arrested.

In one incident, in the Dang district, army and police forces gunned down 11 peasants when they were arguing with a landlord for their share of the harvest. In another incident in the Rolpa district, five civilians were killed and seven injured when an army helicopter fired on people at a religious festival.

Over 50 journalists, as well as activists from various non-governmental organisations, have been arrested. Underlining the extent of the repression, the army and police forces have picked up 50 members of the Communist Party of Nepal (M-L) and an unspecified number from Communist Party of Nepal (UML). Both these parties support the government emergency.

Justifying the civilian killings, army head General S.P. Rana said: “We cannot deny that they [Maoists] are using human shields and therefore when we attack some civilians may get harmed.”

The government’s move to suppress the CPN-M received immediate support from India. India would actively oppose the Maoist insurgency movement and would support the king and the prime minister, Indian foreign minister Justwant Singh told a press conference.

India has supplied two helicopter gun-ships and 11 truckloads of sophisticated weapons and sealed off the India-Nepal border with 80,000 paramilitary troops.

India, which is striving to emerge as a major power in the region, has several motives for intervening in Nepal. It wants to head off China, which is also trying to cultivate a relationship with the Kathmandu regime. Nepal is on the border of the Chinese province of Tibet, now a focal point of interest for the major international powers. China fears that 30,000 exiled Tibetans living in Nepal could be used against it. India also wants to deal a blow against the Nepalese Maoists because of their close connections with separatist forces in India.

After earlier supporting talks, the US changed its position when they broke down. The US embassy in Kathmandu issued a statement backing the government offensive and calling on the Maoists to lay down their arms.

The significance of the struggle in the Himalayan kingdom for the US was underscored in January when US Secretary of State Colin Powell visited the country. This was the first time in 30 years that such a high-ranking member of the US administration has visited Nepal.

After meeting the king, the prime minister and the top military brass, Powell declared that the US was ready to supply military aid. The US is “very concerned [about] what is happening in Nepal,” he told a press conference, adding that a team would soon visit Nepal to discuss what was needed to fight the “Maoist violence.”

Washington’s keenness in cultivating relations with the Nepalese regime is bound up with two important strategic interests of the US: it is close to the oil fields of Central Asia, which the US is looking to exploit, and situated at the underbelly of China, which the US considers to be a rival in Asia.

For its part, the Kathmandu regime is seeking to resolve a decades-long political crisis by winning international support and aid for its efforts to crush internal political opponents. Since 1991 there have been nine governments, including three coalitions. Prime Minister Deuba is the third since the 1999 general election.

Since the mass protest movements in 1990, which ended the three-decade-old absolute monarchy, the Nepalese masses have gained next to nothing in terms of improved social and economic conditions.

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world, with 42 percent of the population below the poverty line, according to official figures. Per capita income is \$250 and 36 percent of the population consume less than the minimum daily calorie requirement. About 60 percent of adults are illiterate, while for women the rate is 70 percent. Life expectancy is 58.1 years and the infant mortality rate is 75 per thousand births.

The masses in the rural areas and in the urban slums live in dire poverty. Smuggling girls, who cannot earn a living, to Thailand and India has become a thriving trade of mafia gangs.

These are some of the social conditions out of which the struggle against the regime has emerged. The origins of the CPN-M lie in the Nepal Communist Party. With the Stalinists developing closer ties with the bourgeois parties, including the Nepal Congress Party in the mid-90s, the Maoists broke away from the ranks of the mainstream party and rapidly gained influence among the rural and urban poor. But the CPN-M has absolutely no perspective for their advance. Its bloody confrontations with the ruling regime are essentially aimed at securing conditions to strike a deal.

Like all Maoist parties, the CPN-M rejects the revolutionary role of the working class and has built support among the peasants, with actions aimed at a more “equitable distribution” of the agricultural product. But for all its radical rhetoric, it has no fundamental differences with the other Stalinist parties.

Its original program called for an alliance with “progressive elements” within the bourgeoisie in the struggle against feudalism. And at its national conference in February last year the CPN-M called for a meeting of “all concerned parties” with the aim of forming an “interim government” and drafting a constitution.

When Deuba assumed power, the Maoist leader Pushpa Dhal Kamal (Prachanda) welcomed the change, saying it was a “victory over reaction” and the CPN-M sought to forge a compromise with his government.

But the claims of the Maoists that some kind of progressive regime could be established by the Nepalese monarchy and ruling classes have been blown apart by the military repression of the Deuba regime, with the support of the Indian and US governments.



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