

# US provides military assistance to Nepal to crush Maoist guerrillas

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An increasingly desperate Nepalese ruling elite has turned to the United States for military assistance in its bid to crush the country's ongoing insurgency led by the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M).

Home Minister Devendra Raj Kandel, who is in day-to-day charge of the security operations, told *Reuters* on April 21 that the country "urgently needs more modern military hardware to fight the Maoists and reduce casualties to government forces". While unsure of the extent of US aid, Kandel indicated that the Bush administration had pledged "all possible help".

Two days later, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher announced that the Bush administration was seeking a Congressional appropriation of \$20 million to bolster the Nepalese security forces. About a dozen American military experts are already in Nepal to assess the needs of the security forces. "This team has been working with the royal army for a number of weeks and will stay there for a few more," a Pentagon spokesman told the media.

The US decision to intervene with significant military aid to Nepal follows a visit by Colin Powell in January—the first by a US Secretary of State in three decades. Powell held a series of high-level meetings with the king, the prime minister and military top brass, and foreshadowed the provision of US military aid. His visit came in the wake of the outbreak of renewed fighting following the collapse of negotiations between the government and the Maoists last November.

In early April, the Nepalese foreign minister visited Washington to discuss details of US military and economic assistance. The latest clashes between the rebels and security forces have provided the pretext for the US and Nepal to announce the military collaboration.

On April 11, Maoist guerrillas launched a major attack on the country residence of Internal Defence Minister, Khum Bahadur Khadka, in the western Dang district. About 60 policemen were reportedly killed and another 29 injured. The government claimed that more than 250 Maoists were

killed in the counterattack. According to district officials, bodies were "scattered around the fields, jungles and riverbanks". It was the fiercest clash since February 17 when fighting left 137 soldiers, policemen and civilians dead in Acham Province.

The CPN-M put further pressure on the government by calling a five-day general strike, including the closure of businesses and industries, from April 23 to April 27. Both sides accused each other of using intimidation. Although the government claimed that the strike had been unsuccessful, significant sections of business and transport in the capital Kathmandu and other towns were shut. Further fighting between government troops and guerrillas was reported last weekend.

According to official reports, at least 3,500 people have died in fighting since the CPN-M launched its guerrilla war in 1996—more than 1,500 since talks broke down last November. While the CPN-M appeared to be willing to reach a deal, the government refused to make concessions and banned CPN-M public rallies. Following an attack on an army base on November 23, the government declared a state of emergency and launched a broad offensive against the Maoists.

The army and the police have used sweeping powers under the emergency legislation to carry out widespread repression, particularly in impoverished rural areas in western Nepal where the Maoists have their strongholds. Human rights groups have accused the government of torture and summary executions. According to official sources, more than 3,000 arrests were made in just three months up to mid-February. Recently King Gayanendra, who wields considerable executive powers, announced large rewards for information leading to the capture of CPN-M leaders, including party secretary Prachanda.

With Washington's support, India has been providing assistance to the Nepalese army, including several military helicopters and lorry loads of weapons. Indian authorities have also sealed the border with Nepal to prevent the movement of Maoist guerrillas. At the end of March,

Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba visited New Delhi to discuss further military assistance. In a joint statement, the two countries agreed to combat "the scourge of terrorism" and "to update the extradition treaty".

In early April, the United Services Institute (USI)—a body of retired Indian army generals and policy makers—held a discussion on Nepal and, on the basis that India could be affected, called for joint military operations. While Deuba has previously floated the idea of asking for "foreign troops," he was quickly forced to retract the statement in the face of opposition to any direct Indian involvement.

Sandwiched between two major regional powers—India and China—the Nepalese ruling elites have attempted to play one off against the other to maintain a degree of independence. As a landlocked country however, Nepal heavily depends on India economically and militarily. Foreign Secretary Madhu Raman Acharya has just visited Russia and China in an attempt to balance growing ties with India. Beijing has obliged by denouncing the rebels and pledging to seal the border between Nepal and Tibet.

But the direct involvement of the US in Nepal will further destabilise the region. Beijing will be quick to note that Washington has used the Maoist rebellion to establish closer military ties in a country that lies on China's southern border, adjacent to the politically sensitive area of Tibet. While no US troops have so far been mooted for Nepal, Washington clearly aims to build a relationship that will complement its presence in Afghanistan and elsewhere in Central Asia. The chief target of this military build-up is China, which Bush described in the 2000 presidential elections as "a strategic competitor".

Inside Nepal, the inability of the army to crush the Maoist guerrillas has exacerbated the country's acute economic problems and heightened tensions within ruling circles. Prime Minister Deuba recently told the press that, if Nepal did not receive foreign aid, "five to 10 years would be needed to end the rebellion that has drained government coffers, crippled the vital tourism industry and scared off foreign investors".

According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB) report issued in April, the growth rate will decline to 3.5 percent this year as compared with last year's 5 percent. Growth in the agricultural sector has declined from 4 to 3 percent while the service sector fallen from 7.3 to 3.5 percent. Tourism, a major foreign currency earner, has plummeted by 40 percent.

The report pointed out that urban unemployment was 7 percent, but added that, in the country as a whole, 47 percent of the workforce is looking for employment. The situation is most acute in rural areas where many people survive on the basis of various foreign-funded "food for work" programs.

Nepal is among 10 poorest counties in the world with an average annual per capita income of \$US230 or just 63 cents a day.

Sections of the ruling elite are openly discussing the possibility of the king seizing power with the backing of the army. At a gathering of the military top brass on March 27, army chief-of-staff General Prazwala Rana denounced politicians for "lack of cooperation" and "bad governance" during the past 12 years. It was only in 1990, in response to widespread popular opposition, that the king, who previously ruled as an absolute monarch, granted limited democratic reforms. Rana said the "political factor" was instrumental in the deteriorating conditions of the country.

Last week Prabhakar Rana, a company director closely connected to the royal family, told the Kathmandu-based *Telegraph*: "Those who practice democracy have failed. They must pull up their socks and mend their ways. If they don't, the army could take over and ask the king to rule or the army could just take over." Under the emergency laws, which were renewed in February, the army already wields considerable power.

Facing the prospect of greater Indian and US support for the Nepalese army, the Maoist leadership has left open the prospect of renewed talks. The *Telegraph* recently reported that CPN-M Secretary Prachanda issued a statement indicating his preparedness for talks if "an environment of positive political outlet" were created. Sections of the Left Opposition parties in Kathmandu, concerned at the prospect of the army strengthening its position, have also appealed for talks. Previously the Deuba government rejected any negotiations unless the Maoists laid down their arms.

Keen to establish a military presence in the country, Washington's interests lie in the conflict continuing. From that standpoint, the military aid will only strengthen the hand of the army, not only against the Maoists but also in making a grab for power in Kathmandu.



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