

The open wounds of Shangri-La

A rigid caste system, a bloody civil war and an inept royal army are paving the way for a Maoist takeover of Nepal, says children's-rights worker PETER DALGLISH

By PETER DALGLISH

Monday, August 8, 2005 Posted at 11:55 AM EST 

If there is one country in the world where a four-wheel-drive vehicle can be put to good use, it must be Nepal, with its rugged terrain, including the deepest valley in the world along the Kali Gandaki River. Late model SUVs are so common among Kathmandu-based aid workers and diplomats that their owners have been cynically dubbed by local media as "the Pajero set." But as the security situation in this Himalayan kingdom continues to unravel, opportunities to satisfy one's wanderlust have been severely curtailed.

Earlier this summer, fresh hostilities between the Royal Nepalese Army and Maoist insurgents broke out only 20 kilometres northeast of Kathmandu, so weekend excursions to the Tibetan border are no longer recommended. On their days off, foreign residents are now confined to small patches of shade under the umbrellas alongside hotel swimming pools, where they sip cool drinks as their kids play in the water. Just outside Kathmandu Valley, schools are shuttered, children go to bed hungry, and everyone fears what the night might bring.

When I arrived in Kathmandu in October, 2002, Maoists were active in only five of the country's 75 districts, and few observers of the political scene considered them a serious threat to the state's security. Over the past two years, the Maoist rebellion has gained momentum, and has spread to virtually all parts of the country.

In Pokhara, Nepal's third-largest city, Maoists last year killed the mayor in a brazen midday attack after he refused their demands to resign. Called the Switzerland of Nepal because of its lakeside setting and commanding view of the Annapurna range, Pokhara has been emptied of tourists, and the local economy devastated.

A turning point in the conflict was the rout by Maoist forces of the Royal Nepalese Army in a sophisticated and well-co-ordinated attack on the town of Beni, in which the most senior government official was captured. RNA officers were humbled by reports that half the Maoist combatants at Beni were women, and that they had demonstrated considerable prowess with their weapons. As Maoist attacks on police outposts and bombings of

public busses continue unabated, public confidence in the Royal Nepalese Army has eroded.

According to the International Crisis Group, "The Royal Nepalese Army has shown very little ability to contain the conflict or reverse Maoist advances. It does next to nothing to provide security for civilians; indeed, many people whom the Crisis Group interviewed across Nepal said that they were more concerned by violence from the state security forces than the Maoists."

A Western diplomat in Kathmandu warns that everything is now at risk: "We are much closer to that which seemed almost laughable two years ago: A Maoist takeover has become possible. It has to be taken seriously."

Children have been profoundly affected by the conflict. According to Unicef, attending school has become a hazardous activity in Nepal, as teachers and students are frequent targets of abduction, arrest and harassment by both Maoists and security forces. Politics has contaminated Nepal's education system, with appointments of principals being based more on connections than on competence. As well, gender discrimination is the rule rather than the exception in the education sector, where 74 out of 75 district education officers in Nepal are men.

Nepal remains the strictest caste-based society in Asia, and to a large extent the fissure separating Maoist supporters from the urban establishment reflects caste distinctions. For defenders of human rights and advocates for the poor, the caste system is the shame of South Asia; its eradication has been enunciated by the Maoist leadership as a non-negotiable item.

A British study on social change in Maoist-affected areas showed women and disadvantaged groups residing in Maoist communities making big gains in social and economic status, at the expense of high-caste members. Few items on the Maoist agenda are more unsettling to the Brahmin and Chetri elite than the prospect of a caste-free Nepal: The system has guaranteed them the best jobs, and ensured that their children are first in line for education and other opportunities.

In a televised speech to the nation on Feb. 1, King Gyanendra suspended most constitutional rights, including freedom of assembly, expression and movement, protection from preventive detention, and trade-union rights. Hundreds of local political leaders and student activists have been arrested, and a climate of fear has set in. As reported by Human Rights Watch, "virtually the entire human-rights activist community has been forced into hiding."



While the state of emergency has subsequently been lifted, the ordinances introduced following the royal proclamation of Feb. 1 remain in force, including censorship of the nation's normally vibrant media. Local FM radio stations have been told "no news, no views, no analyses, no discussions, just music." One Western diplomat has described the tactics used by the King to control dissidents and to intimidate the media as reminiscent of those employed by South Africa during the years of apartheid.

Nepal now has the dubious distinction of recording more disappearances than any other nation in the world. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Unicef, and the U.S. State Department have all issued detailed reports of abduction, torture, rape and summary executions in Nepal by security forces and by Maoists. Human-rights experts in Nepal, hardened by postings in Rwanda and Bosnia, are particularly alarmed by the apparent immunity from prosecution enjoyed by security forces and Maoists alike. An Amnesty International report stated, "Despite high-profile pledges of commitment to human rights, both the Nepali government and military and the Maoist leadership have failed to investigate human-rights abuses or punish those responsible."

In an attempt to escape violence and lawlessness, people have abandoned rural areas, and crossed the border to India, resulting in extensive population displacement. Perhaps the best indicator of the level of despair in Nepal is the fact that 12,000 Nepali workers are currently employed in Iraq, willing to risk their lives in the hope of earning money to send home to feed their families.

Nepal's grave human-rights situation must now be the focus of development organizations working in the country, including the Canadian International Development Agency; a business-as-usual approach will only prolong the conflict, and contribute to even greater levels of suffering. A priority is funding for field-based monitors who would serve as the eyes and ears of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The goal must be to send a clear message to both sides of the conflict that those responsible for the torture and killings of civilians will be held to account for their actions, and that even Nepal's poorest citizens deserve the full protection of the international community.

The children with whom I've worked in Nepal -- courageous kids employed by brick kilns, coal mines and carpet factories -- have been failed by their own society. Now they turn to the outside world for help.

Peter Dalglish is a lawyer, and the founder of Street Kids International. From October, 2002, until March, he served as chief technical adviser to the UN in Nepal on child labour.