

## Ceasefire Brings Hope of End to Violence

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KATHMANDU, Sep 4 (IPS) - Nepalis waited Sunday to learn if the violence that has overwhelmed rural life here in recent years would end, at least temporarily.

A day earlier, Maoist rebels declared a three-month ceasefire in their nearly decade-long war against the state that has killed 12,000 people and forced many thousands more to flee across the border to India or to the safety of the capital Kathmandu and other cities.

By early Sunday afternoon there was still no official response to the rebels' announcement from the royal government.

Everyone else seemed to have an opinion. "It's a very good initiative. The Maoists are trying to show they are prepared to go the extra mile to patch up their differences. It's also good that people have some respite (from the war). There's so much tension in the country -- for businesses, travellers, general citizens," said former diplomat Yadav Kant Silwal.

"I think the government has to come out with a positive reply ... the problem is the army still feel they can beat the Maoists, and that's what the king is hearing from his advisers," added Silwal, also former secretary-general of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in an interview.

On Feb. 1 King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev seized power and declared a state of emergency. He cut all land communications to and from Nepal for a week, suspended constitutional rights and jailed senior political leaders, blaming their corruption and mismanagement for the ongoing insurgency.

But since then there have been few signs the army is gaining the upper hand over the Maoists in a battle that most military experts have called unwinnable, particularly since much of Nepal's hilly terrain is difficult to reach by land.

Yet on Tuesday, Chief of Army Staff Pyar Jung Thapa vowed "to defeat (Maoists) at any cost".

In his statement Saturday, Maoist leader Prachanda said, "We believe our move will encourage all forces, within and outside Nepal, who want peace through a forward-moving political solution."

NGO leader Shanta Lal Mulmi called the declaration "very positive ... it shows that now the Maoists, to some extent, would like to join the political mainstream".

"Let's see how the government reacts -- if they're very much serious on this issue they should give an immediate response. But if they're under army control, it will be delayed," the secretary-general of the NGO Federation of Nepal told IPS.

The leader of the powerful Nepali Congress party, Girija Prasad Koirala, told reporters Saturday he welcomed the Maoists' announcement. "In fact, they made this announcement at our request," he said.

The Communist Party's Madhav Kumar Nepal urged the rebels to return to peaceful politics and give up arms. He said King Gyanendra had violated the constitution and launched autocratic rule. "The history from 1950 is testimony that monarchy is completely useless for Nepali people," 'The Himalayan Times' quoted him as saying.

Both political parties have now renounced the current constitutional monarchy and are calling for a republican form of government to be established. The Maoists also advocate republicanism but as a first step only toward a communist system.

On Thursday, Prachanda and India's Maoist leader Ganapathy released a statement pledging "to fight unitedly till the entire conspiracies hatched by the imperialists and reactionaries are crushed and the people's cause of socialism and communism (is) established in Nepal, India and all over the world".

That revolutionary agenda is one reason the mainstream parties have balked at Maoists' recent invitations to sit down for talks. Another is that rebels have broken past promises to refrain from targeting political party workers.

The politicians are also worried about government threats to treat anyone cooperating with Maoists as "terrorists".

Other Nepalis are also sceptical. "You don't believe what those guys say, do you? The Maoists have also betrayed their declarations in the past, like they said they would stop targeting civilians, but they didn't," says a young woman who works in the finance industry.

"Their leaders also feel that if they sit down for talks their cadres will feel that they betrayed the cause," she adds.

"Maybe they'll also use the time to replenish their weapons," suggests her friend, who works in an international NGO.

The Maoist statement said the ceasefire will remain in place until Dec. 2, so people could observe the upcoming Dashain and Tihar festivals, the year's largest, without fear.

Prachanda said he hoped the move would "encourage political powers, including the United Nations, to initiate new moves for ensuring progressive political reforms in Nepal".

The last ceasefire -- for peace talks in 2003 -- was called, and broken, by the army. That is one reason why there is no trust between the palace, parties and Maoists, says Silwal, adding, "that is why I say there's a need for a third party, like (United Nations Secretary-General) Kofi Annan."

The Maoists have long urged UN intervention but the palace and some party leaders reject the move. Last month King Gyanendra, who is expected to attend the UN General Assembly later this month, toured the Maoist heartland of western Nepal, where he was thronged by awestruck villagers, some of whom consider him a god.

Returning to Kathmandu, the monarch gave the strongest sign yet that he is willing to negotiate with the political parties. Now, the Maoists have taken the initiative. "The ball rests wholly in the court of the king," says Silwal, "but nobody is hopeful that he will take the steps necessary to bring about a dialogue."