

Displaced Face Uncertain Return

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KATHMANDU, Jun 28 (IPS) - At least tens of thousands of Nepalis have fled their homes during a Maoist uprising and now that peace has come, many are pondering a return. But it is not easy: no government programmes pave their way, many of their homes need repairs while long-neglected fields require work before planting, and locals must first assuage Maoist gatekeepers.

"First our district representative must talk with the local Maoist leadership to get their OK. But they can't make that decision themselves: they have to talk with the regional leader. Once we get assurances from them, we can begin. It's a lengthy process," says Rupesh Nepal of the non-governmental organisation (NGO), Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC), which has helped settle a few hundred internally displaced people (IDPs).

"Each district is different," adds Nepal. "In some places the Maoists are softer, they want to be seen respecting human rights...but they still have not let some people return -- those who have killed one of their members, acted as spies or committed other major 'crimes'."

Maoists tossed their first homemade pressure cooker bombs at police posts and government offices in the country's impoverished midwest region a decade ago, signalling their campaign to "liberate" the country's oppressed indigenous people, women and dalits (so-called 'untouchables').

In ten years they chased government officials and security forces from up to three-quarters of the rugged countryside of this small state wedged between India and China, where many villagers still have to walk at least one day from home to the nearest commercial centre. It is estimated that 14,000 people were killed in the insurgency, mostly innocents caught in the crossfire.

In early April, an alliance of political parties backed by the rebels intensified the 15-month "people's movement" against the direct rule of King Gyanendra. Three weeks later, hundreds of thousands of Nepalis were swarming onto the streets of cities and towns daily. On Apr. 24 the monarch capitulated, reviving the lower house of parliament.

Ten days ago Maoist leaders, branded "terrorists" by the state until just two months ago, were meeting Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala at his residence, planning how to dissolve parliament and take subsequent steps to meet the rebels' long held demand for a constituent assembly that will draft a new constitution and decide the future of the monarchy.

But that path will not be smooth. Political party and Maoist leaders continue to fence publicly over a number of issues: when to dissolve parliament; when the rebels must hand over their weapons and to whom; and ongoing intimidation by local rebel leaders, who enjoy a great deal of autonomy.

The latter is hindering many potential returnees, found a recent United Nations mission to the country's east. "Local commanders were familiar with the party's commitment (to allow IDPs safe passage home) but in reality they put up conditions," said Bjorn Pettersson of the U.N.'s Nepal human rights office (OHCHR) in an interview.

"They would say (returnees) have to come before the people's court" or perform forced labour, added Pettersson, one of 15 people from six U.N. agencies and two NGOs who travelled on foot and by vehicle for nearly two weeks to assess the situation in eight districts. Some areas they visited hadn't seen international workers during the decade of conflict.

On Tuesday, OHCHR Nepal said that Maoists in the central region, which includes the capital

Kathmandu, had killed nine people since May 3. "In most of the cases, the victims were accused of 'crimes' or 'offences' and were apparently under investigation. In some of those cases, local Maoist leaders had accepted responsibility and had apologised," the office added in a statement.

The U.N. inter-agency team's rough guess is that an average of 30 individuals left each village development committee (there are roughly 50 per district) during the conflict. Estimates of the number of IDPs countrywide vary widely. OHCHR suggested 200,000 in a document last month while the international NGO Caritas said 350,000, when it appealed for one million dollars to help IDPs in February.

The new government believes 250,000-300,000 people were displaced by Maoist activities -- often extortion against wealthier Nepalis and threats of forced recruitment for poorer ones -- and is planning assistance for them ahead of July's budget, says MP Diliraj Khanal, a member of parliament's finance committee.

People will be treated according to their situation, he told IPS in an interview. "The effect on one family is completely different than the other. One family has fled because of Maoist interrogation; another has lost their house and all their goods and even if they want to go home, they have no cash."

Who delivers the relief and rehabilitation could also vary, added Khanal. "Donors in some districts could take responsibility and then in other places it could be done by the government with donor support. Civil society could play some sort of watchdog role."

One sticking point is how to treat the thousands of Nepalis displaced by the security forces, which have also committed grievous human rights violations -- including documented cases of torture and forced disappearances --- in the past decade. Previous government IDP policies have ignored this group and Khanal would not suggest how many individuals might be involved.

Nor would he reveal what the suggested price-tag for aiding returnees might be.

Pettersson said the new policy must be wide-ranging and include such things as registering returnees locally and providing them physical support, including housing repairs and farming tools. Resolving disputes over land that was redistributed after its owner fled will also be important.

The 357 IDPs that INSEC has repatriated in the past two years -- with support from international NGOs such as ActionAid, the UK development agency DFID and the U.N.'s humanitarian affairs office (OCHA) -- have each received Rs 3,000 (40.82 U.S. dollars) from the NGO to buy food. "Their major problem is land. For two or three years no one has been cultivating so they lack the seasonal foods that they need for survival," said Nepal.

Aside from the money, the returnees will be on their own, getting a follow-up visit from INSEC local staff only after three months, he added.