

## **Must India Join Bush War on Nepal's Maoists?**

By J. Sri Raman

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On June 10, Nepal's post-monarchy prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala left India after a four-day visit, laden with an economic aid package of \$218 million. Two days later, a court in the South Indian city of Chennai (formerly Madras) handed a three-year prison sentence to a leader of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) or the CPNM.

The two reports together pointed to major features of India's role in Nepal - past, present, and (possibly) future. The involvement of India in the affairs of its Himalayan neighbor has been, is, and may continue to be intimately related to its concern over the role of the Maoists in the mountain country.

"Release Comrade C.P. Gajurel (Gaurav)" is one of the many slogans emblazoned on the homepage of the [CPNM's web site](#) ever since Chandra Prasad Gajurel, alias Gaurav, was arrested in Chennai in August 2003. He was charged with an attempt to flee to London using a fake passport. He was detained, it must be noted, under India's National Security Act.

The defense counsel did draw the court's notice to the fact that "the purpose and grounds of the detention" were "at variance with each other." The court's counter to that was that Gajurel was associated with a "terrorist" organization.

In other words, the official description in India of the CPNM was the same as the USA's. The party was one of the many organizations on which the George Bush administration put the "terrorist" tag in the aftermath of 9/11, and King Gyanendra of Nepal was one of the many to find the label convenient as he stepped up the war on the Maoists as Washington's "anti-terror" ally, with the help of Western military largesse worth tens of millions of dollars for the 12th-poorest nation in the world.

The tag, needless to add, tallied with the view of the Maoists taken by the then far-right government in New Delhi under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. India's "religious" right, which hailed Gyanendra as a "Hindu king" and even envisaged him as a "Hindu emperor," now made support for Nepal's hated monarchy an "anti-terror" state policy. New Delhi's talk, until a month ago, about the parliament and the monarchy as the "twin pillars" of a stable Nepal was aimed mainly at keeping the Maoists out.

Despite his sentence, Gajurel will have to spend only two more months in prison, since he has been detained long enough, a victim of India's slow justice. His release, however, will not signify a radical change in India's Nepal policy in this respect, effected by Vajpayee's successors.

Washington, as we know, has accepted, if with poor grace, the defeat and disempowerment of Gyanendra by the Nepalese people. But the Bush administration has refused to remove the "terrorist" tag it put on the CPNM. New Delhi has officially approved of talks between the Seven-Party Alliance (SPA) regime of Koirala and the Maoists. But, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government has yet to distinguish and distance itself from the position of its "strategic partner" on the CPNM.

India has agreed to release 136 other Nepalese Maoists in its prisons, including senior CPNM leader Mohan Baidya, alias Kiran, languishing for long in a cell in Siliguri in the State of West Bengal. While the date of release is not known, Koirala has announced, on his return to

Kathmandu, the withdrawal of cases against Maoists, paving the way for the immediate release of 124, with freedom round the corner for another 250 or so. Among those released is Matrika Prasad Yadav, a top CPNM leader, arrested on Indian soil in 2003 - and handed over to Nepalese authorities in "anti-terror" solidarity. Tales of his subsequent torture in the barracks of the Royal Nepal Army served only to tarnish India's image in Nepal, and his release will reinforce the demand for early freedom for Maoist detainees in India.

Even more widely and anxiously watched will be India's role in the peace process underway between the SPA and the Maoists. The CPNM has made known its preference for the United Nations as the monitor of the process, including the Maoists' disarmament before elections to a new constituent assembly. New Delhi is not hastening normalization in Nepal by its non-response thus far to the proposal.

What motivates the Indian rulers against Nepal's Maoists, besides the "anti-terror" mantra? Gyanendra's relations with the far right and feudal houses of "royalty" in India, of course, are an important factor. Added to this are apprehensions about Nepal's Maoists aggravating an armed-left threat in India.

It is an open secret that the Nepalese Maoists have no relations with Beijing, which indeed has been a stauncher supporter of Gyanendra in the past than even India. Mystery, however, has been created over the CPNM's connections with avowedly Maoist armed groups in India, known more popularly as Naxalites (after Naxalbari in West Bengal, where one of such groups staged a notable revolt decades ago). It is these alleged connections that far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Lal Krishna Advani invoked, at the height of the anti-monarchy movement in Nepal, when he called for "the complete isolation of the Maoists."

Little evidence of such links, however, has been found. Says Conn Hallinan who has studied the subject: "While it is true that Nepal Maoists occasionally use India as a haven, there is no evidence of any serious cooperation or coordination between any of these groups. The Indian insurgencies are driven more by local conditions than by any pan-Indian collusion with Nepal Maoists. And, in any case, the groups don't share a common ideology, political program or even goals."

True, the CPNM has been accused and, like any armed group, is guilty of some human rights violations. All human rights organizations acquainted with Nepal's situation, however, are agreed that the Royal Nepal Army has been guilty of many times more such violations. True, again, the Maoists have recruited their cadre more from the 12-22 group than from any other. Nepal-watchers are agreed, again, however, that the Maoists have earned support in the countryside by fighting for land reforms and against caste and gender oppression.

The SPA does not seem any more entertain fears engendered by the earlier Maoist goal of a single-party state. The SPA and Nepal's people have acquired a new confidence. As Nepal Times editor Kunda Dixit (who supports the peace process) puts it, "the message (of the pro-democracy movement) is that, just as the Nepal people stood up as one against the king and his army, they will also not tolerate Maoist totalitarianism." The revised Maoist priorities certainly show recognition of this reality.

The CPNM's participation in the process of democracy will strengthen and deepen it in two ways. First, it will end Nepal's civil war that no amount of army atrocities or Western arms have been able to. Secondly, it will add a socio-economic dimension to the political process, which may rapidly lose popular support at the lowest levels.

If the Maoists are denied participation in the process, on the other hand, the consequences can be dangerous for the country and the region. The prospect of a Nepalese variant of Pol Potism - resulting from marginalization of the Maoists with about 15,000 members and thousands of guns - cannot be ruled out.

It must be hoped that these considerations will decide India's Nepal policy rather than the compulsions of a newfound "strategic partnership."