

Nepal Rebels Declare Cease-Fire in Bid to Unify King's Opponents

KATMANDU, Sept. 3 (Reuters) - Nepal's Maoist rebels announced a three-month cease-fire starting Saturday, their chief said, in a move to win support from political parties opposed to King Gyanendra's seizure of power in February.

For "this period, our People's Liberation Army will be in defensive positions," the chief, Prachanda, said.

"The P.L.A. will not launch any offensive from its side," he said. "We believe our move will encourage all forces, within and outside Nepal, who want peace through a forward-moving political solution."

"We take this very positively," said Arjun Narsingh K. C., a spokesman for the Nepali Congress, the biggest party. He expressed hope that the cease-fire would help establish a permanent peace.

Nepal's mainstream political parties said in July that they would talk with the rebels about joint protests against Gyanendra's seizure of power, but added that the rebels must stop the violence as a condition for talks.

Prachanda also promised in July that the rebels would not attack unarmed civilians and would stop extortion. It also urged the seven parties to choose negotiators for talks on a united campaign against the king.

The seven political parties that controlled more than 190 seats in the 205-member Parliament dissolved in 2002 have protested King Gyanendra's overthrow of the multi-party government and assumption of absolute power on Feb. 1.

More than 5,000 people attended a rally here on Saturday, organized by the seven parties to demand the return of democracy.

Protesters holding red and white party flags and banners criticizing the king sat cross-legged and shouted slogans. "Down with autocracy, long live democracy," participants shouted as party leaders vowed to intensify such protests.

The king says his move to take power was prompted by the failure of squabbling parties to quell the increasingly deadly Maoist revolt in which more than 12,500 people have been killed.

The truce, if it holds, would be the longest since talks collapsed in Aug. 2003.

Analysts said Prachanda's announcement was an important step.

"This could create a more favorable situation for talks between the seven-party alliance and the Maoists," said Padma Ratna Tuladhar, a human rights advocate who helped mediate the collapsed talks.

The talks failed because of a dispute over the role of the monarchy.

The army said that it had heard about the rebel truce but did not want to comment. The royalist government did not comment.

"This is the most significant move towards peace since August 2003," said Kunda Dixit, editor of the weekly Nepali Times.

"But the situation is now much more complicated," he added, referring to the king's assumption of power.