

Prime Minister, Maoist Chief Sit Together

by Marty Logan

KATHMANDU, June 16 (IPS) - Nepal's veteran, centrist prime minister, the surprise leader of the "people's government" born from April's uprising, on Friday, met the chief of the country's powerful Maoist rebels, who has decided to trade in guns for elections after a decade of armed struggle.

Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala and Pushpa Kamal Dahal (aka Prachanda) shook hands at the prime minister's residence in the centre of the capital Kathmandu, lending authority to the second round of preliminary peace talks that began Thursday.

After closed, informal discussions, both men led their teams to the table as talks resumed. It was the first time that leaders from both sides have sat together since the Maoists launched their war against the monarchy and to liberate the country's downtrodden people in 1996.

Since the "people's movement" -- a mix of supporters of the seven main political parties (SPA) and Maoist cadres bolstered by civil servants and average Nepalis -- flooded streets country-wide and forced King Gyanendra to give up power, Koirala and his allies in the SPA and revived House of Representatives have sparred continuously with Maoist leaders.

Almost daily in the media and at public meetings each side accuses the other of betraying the spirit, if not the letter, of the "12-point agreement" they signed in November 2005 as a strategy to end the autocracy. The king had fired his hand-picked prime minister and seized power in a bloodless coup in February 2005.

Prachanda has focused on the SPA's alleged promise that the revived House would function for just a matter of days before being replaced by an interim government. Instead, its leaders are busy consolidating power, he argues.

Koirala denies that quick dissolution was promised and repeatedly points out that the Maoists have not agreed to disarm despite having declared a ceasefire and that their cadres are still extorting money from Nepalis.

This week the public posturing took a turn when the prime minister declared that a new Nepal should include space for a ceremonial king, despite strong public sentiment to replace the constitutional monarchy with a republican system. Another betrayal, retorted the Maoists.

Despite the rhetoric the two sides are compromising. For example, the government has freed hundreds of jailed Maoists and the rebels have agreed to drop their demand for a roundtable conference representing all sectors of society before an interim government and constitution can be created.

Now it is expected that the interim leadership will be announced soon after July's budget announcement. Parliament was adjourned Friday until next month.

While the political process is acrimonious, it is moving. But progress on monitoring the ceasefire and the future disarmament of the "people's liberation army" was absent until Thursday, when the talks teams agreed to ask the United Nations to assist a truce monitoring team and to monitor human rights.

Nepal's giant and hugely influential southern neighbour India has long rejected U.N. involvement in the Nepali peace process. During Koirala's visit to New Delhi last week, where he was welcomed as the liberator of his people, Indian leaders signalled that they would accept the world body playing a role in the decommissioning of Maoist arms but not in peace talks.

Days later a local U.N. official told journalists that the government and Maoists must put some flesh on their ceasefire agreement. The number of weapons in rebel hands, their fighting strength and where both arms and soldiers are kept are the sorts of detail required, he argued.

The Maoists are ready to provide that information, central committee member Dev Gurung told IPS in an interview.

"We ourselves have previously put forward this type of proposal to the government," added Gurung, sitting in a sparsely furnished lounge in the party's peace secretariat in Kathmandu.

"But some neighbouring countries don't want the presence of the U.N., which is why their involvement is delayed. We are calling upon the U.N. to monitor the (talks) process, the election and the armies."

The two sides had agreed to invite national and international teams to monitor the ceasefire at the first talks May 26. They also pledged to stop recruiting for their armies and the Maoists agreed to end extortion. "We don't want to return to war again," added Maoist spokesman Krishna Bahadur Mahara after that meeting.

Gurung, a member of the Maoist negotiating team, told IPS that the rebels' cadres who agreed to take up weapons, fight and if necessary die for their liberation understand the change in strategy. "When the people's war started that was also a political process. War is a continuation of other forms of politics."

Roughly 14,000 people were killed in fighting between the Maoists and the state, most of them innocent villagers caught in the crossfire. It is estimated that the rebels gained control of up to 80 percent of the countryside of this widely diverse land, home to Mt Everest in the north and steaming Gangetic plains to the south.

In some places they have established, parallel working governments that, among other activities, collect taxes and hire contractors to build and repair roads.

"The Nepali people are ready to participate no matter what form of struggle we choose. That is fully accepted by the people," said Gurung. "Without this understanding of liberation, they wouldn't have been willing to pick up guns."