

NEPAL: UN Role Key to Building Trust With Maoists

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KATHMANDU, Aug 4 (IPS) - A United Nations mission aimed at forging consensus among Nepal's warring sides on the issue of arms management left the Himalayan kingdom Thursday without an agreement. However, the U.N.'s formal involvement is keeping hopes alive for a permanent solution to a conflict that has killed more than 13,000 people.

The U.N. formally got involved with the arrival of the mission last week. Its main task was to forge a consensus on arms management, and also to study how the world body could assist in the areas of ceasefire monitoring, electoral assistance and expanding human rights. But after a week of often frustrating negotiations, it could not prod the two sides towards a consensus.

Just before departing Kathmandu on Thursday, Swedish diplomat Staffan de Mistura, who led mission at the behest of U.N. secretary general Kofi Annan, tried to hid the disappointment, but it was writ large on his face.

"No I am not disappointed," he told journalists. "In fact I am quite optimistic that the momentum regarding the confidence building measures are going to produce effects. Now, I would have liked to have those confidence building measures immediately. But even if they are announced in the next two or three days while they are being absorbed by everyone, its fine. The important point is that there is a momentum in the Nepal peace process. All sides want peace."

The developments are being seen in Nepal as a setback, but not a total failure. Many analysts say the de Mistura mission helped focus the minds of all sides on the key issue of arms management, which has been the stumbling block in furthering the fragile peace process which has been in place since late April.

The influential Nepali Times wrote that despite the lack of an agreement, the U.N. mission should be credited with keeping minds focussed on building momentum for the peace process. It noted, too, that it was unrealistic to hope for quick progress on such a difficult issue.

For now though, arms and armies management remain the key issue. "They are related to arms management and armies management," de Mistura said pointing out the present difficulties. "There are concrete signals that each side can give to the other side obviously with the assistance of the U.N., in order to start building confidence about the solutions."

Sources in government and among Maoists, and officials close to the U.N. mission, have told IPS that the differences boiled down to the Maoists' refusal to accept a "double key" formula to manage their arms unilaterally. The double key formula, which has been widely used to demilitarize a war zone, has yielded positive results in other conflicts. In principle, it works like this: confine combatant armies in separate barracks, construct armouries in each of the barracks, count the weapons and put them in the armouries, lock the armouries with two set of locks. One set of keys is held by respective combatant army and the other by the U.N. monitors.

"What I have detected is there is lack of trust in some cases. There is lack of knowledge about some of the techniques of confidence-building. In both cases the U.N. can help," de Mistura said.

The Maoists' chief negotiator Krishna Bahadur Mahara told IPS that his group would accept the double key formula if the government's army too was subjected to similar controls. "How can we accept demilitarization only for us and not for them," Mahara asked. "If they put the Nepal Army under the same conditions of monitoring as us, then we have no problems in accepting that."

Nepal's Seven Party Alliance (SPA) government however thinks differently. A minister requesting anonymity said, "Everywhere else in the world, it is the rebel army which has been disarmed. The Nepal Army is a legitimate force, we will not agree to disarm it."

Many in Nepal would argue that, at least on this point, the Maoists are right. Allowing the U.N. to decommission only their arms and not of the opposing side's would be suicidal for the rebels, some analysts say. But if it were only an issue of arms management, then the government could have been flexible. However the Maoists have made the issue complex by linking it with overarching political issues as well as reforms in the Nepal Army.

"Arms management is not the main issue. We want a comprehensive package agreement that encompasses political issues, joint control of the two armies and reform in the Nepal Army," said another Maoist leader Dev Gurung.

It is this linkage that has the government and its army suspicious. Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala on Thursday is reported to have voiced to de Mistura his strong opposition on proceeding ahead with any other issue but arms management. "It is important to separate the Maoists from their guns ahead of future constituent assembly elections," said one of the prime minister's aides. "After we do that, we can take up the other issues."

The writing of a new constitution by a future elected constituent assembly is seen by all sides as a permanent solution to Nepal's 10 year-old crisis. And it is to assist in this process that the U.N. was formally invited in last Month, by Koirala. But the U.N. can only do what the parties allow it to do. Despite severe pressure applied by the de Mistura mission throughout its stay in Kathmandu, the two sides refused to budge from their basic positions on arms management.

De Mistura is said to be frustrated that the window of opportunity, he urged both sides to seize, is slipping away. But he also sees hope. "Sometimes problems like arms management don't need to be solved in one slot. Because then you get wall-t-o wall and principled approaches, they can be solved by small slices building confidence," he said.