

## Perspectives on the Current State of Affairs in Nepal

Thursday, June 11, 2009

In a discussion hosted by the South Asia program, Mary Wertz, the current ICRC Head of Delegation to Nepal provided her appraisal of the evolving situation in the Himalayan nation. Ms. Wertz was stationed in Nepal in 2006, shortly after the signing of a peace accord between the country's rival political parties and the king. Since that time she has facilitated all ICRC activities in Nepal, which include helping victims of Nepal's civil war find lost family members, working to assure food security for the country's most vulnerable citizens, and monitoring prison life in several of Nepal's detainment centers. As a recent observer of life in post-monarchic Nepal, Ms. Wertz was able to provide a revealing first-hand account of the evolving state of affairs in that country.

### **Progress on Democracy?**

Ms. Wertz opened her remarks with a brief overview of the political developments in Nepal since the signing of 2006 peace accord, which brought an end to Nepal's decade-long civil war. The accord brought some semblance of stability to the Nepalese political process by allowing the former rebel Maoists to be a part of it, but progress toward democracy has been slow and arduous. In the April 2008 elections for the Constituent Assembly—the body charged with rewriting the constitution—the Maoists (Communist Party of Nepal) garnered enough seats to form and then lead a coalition government. However, due to the ardent opposition of the Nepali Congress Party, it was August before the Maoist leader, Prachanda, became prime minister. In the interregnum, the Constituent Assembly voted to abolish the 240 year-old monarchy and elected Nepal's first president. With all of these milestones, democracy seemed to be taking hold in Nepal.

Unfortunately for the country, the last nine months have dampened optimism about democratic progress. The government has been unstable, and, in May 2009, after a protracted struggle with the army and the Supreme Court over the dismissal of the army chief, Prime Minister Prachanda tendered his resignation. Strikes, protests, and general unrest have crippled the country in the last month, leading to some pessimism about Nepal's democratic future. Having watched events unfold, Ms. Wertz was still able to sound a note of cautious optimism. As it stands, she believes the country can get back on track and that a return to conflict is not inevitable—at least not within the next twelve months.

### **Divisions Everywhere**

In assessing the reasons for the collapse, this past May, of the Maoist-led government, Ms. Wertz pointed to what she saw as the increased polarization of Nepalese politics, particularly the division between the Nepalese army and the Maoists in the government. Following the 2006 peace accord, the soldiers of the rebel Maoist army were barracked in 28 different sites around Nepal, leaving the country with essentially two standing armies. Despite UN intervention and continued dialogue on the issue, a consensus on the Maoist army's future has yet to materialize. As such they remain a perceived threat to the power of the government army and to the overall

legitimacy of the state—a powder keg capable of re-igniting the civil war if not dealt with properly.

She also noted, in addition to polarization, the palpable generational divide between the veteran political actors of *Old* Nepal and the younger political actors of *New* Nepal. In a country where 30-40 percent of the people are undernourished and electricity is unavailable for 16 hours each day, there is increasing frustration with the government's inability to provide basic services—one of the impetuses for the civil war. Out of necessity, Ms. Werntz says, the Nepalese have relied on their communities when in need, but there should be a stronger government presence up the administrative chain from the local to the national level. Citizens are looking for a less Kathmandu-centric Nepal where their local concerns are better represented and better addressed. The minority Madeshi people, in particular, have, through sustained lobbying, achieved improved representation under the new government, but their success has emboldened many other ethnic-minorities, such as the Tharus, to press their own demands. This has placed further strain on the government.

Complicating the tenuous situation in Nepal are the country's relations with the giant next door, India. Traditionally, the militaries of both nations have had strong ties, but this relationship may have weakened in 2004 when the Congress Party returned to power as head of a coalition that included the Communist Party of India. The Indian communists sympathized with the Maoist cause in Nepal and tilted Indian foreign policy away from the Nepalese government, which at that time did not include the Maoists. In 2007, the Nepalese government accused India of covertly supporting the Madeshi movement in Nepal in order to destabilize it. With the triumph of the Congress Party in the recent Indian elections, the new government in Delhi no longer includes the Communist Party. Without the need to please its former coalition party, Congress may alter India's response to the Maoists who are now a part of the Nepalese government.

### **To the Edge and Back**

With the future actions of the Maoists still uncertain, the voices of ethnic minorities rising, and the political reshuffling in Delhi reshaping India's foreign policy, Nepal will remain on unsure footing for the foreseeable future. However, as Ms. Werntz reiterated multiple times in the discussion, the Nepalese have an undeniable wellspring of restraint. They have a knack for going to the brink of government collapse and renewed conflict, but never actually going over the precipice. Success could very well be within reach. But for Nepal to remain conflict free, all the parties involved, particularly the Maoists, will have to remain on board for the reconciliation process.