We use cookies to ensure that we deliver the best user experience of our website. If you would like to, you can change your cookie settings at any time. Continue

Week in Nepal

This visit to Nepal is part of a longer term project for the UK's Department for International Development and an international NGO, Saferworld. It supports me (Paul Jackson) as an adviser to the secretariat charged with managing the Maoist combatants following the ten year war in Nepal. Since the Comprehensive peace Agreement in 2006, the Maoist Army has been held in cantonments and, as part of the peace agreement, there have been discussions about what to do with them.

Essentially there are two main options that we are dealing with: firstly, if any of the combatants wish to be integrated into the security army – namely the army - then we need to define what that process might look like; and secondly, if combatants wish to go back in to civilian life, how they might do that, what support they may need and where they might go. This is very simple on first glance, but it is a deeply political, sensitive and divisive process. Even though around 60% of the Maoists have said that they wish to return to civilian life, they all say that if they do not get most of their demands met over access to education, employment and opportunities then they would return to the forest and continue fighting.

Not so royal - Friday 1 April 11.18 (GMT)

Those of you who are Royal watchers may have noticed the issue with my last blog. You may also know that William and Kate are due to take their honeymoon in the Caribbean, not post-conflict Nepal. This was actually a stunt pulled by one of the national newspapers this morning, on April Fools' Day. This apparently is a big event here in Nepal for some reason. Still apparently it caused a few jitters in the Embassy this morning!

This is my last blog from Nepal and I am about to leave for the airport and the 23 hour journey back to the UK. I arrive back some time on Saturday and then have a day to recover. Monday I will return to the office and start dealing with the job of being a Head of Department again. Still, following successful meetings with DFID and the Ambassador, they want me to continue coming back over the next year to support the peace process. No-one seems all that optimistic about the speed of the process itself, but the fact that they are talking rather than shooting seems to be a victory to me and I remain optimistic that all of these small steps will eventually add up to a great leap. Ultimately it is a frustrating, exciting and ultimately rewarding job and I am looking forward to returning to Kathmandu. Thanks for reading.

Royalty - Friday 1 April 03.10 (GMT)

I wasn't sure what I was going to blog about today, but the whole thing has become rather addictive. This is my last morning in Nepal and today will be largely spent tying up loose ends and reporting back on the visit.

I will spend most of the morning with the UK representatives here and then off go to a meeting with the UN, who manage some of the former combatants. Most of this is just keeping people in the loop, but given the fact that I am British and I am the one international person at the heart of this process, the Ambassador is keen to be informed, particularly since I gave him a view last time that accorded with his own opinion. The Ambassador here came from Baghdad, so he has an interesting take on the situation in Nepal and the position of the army specifically. No doubt we will return to the unlikely possibility of a coup this morning.

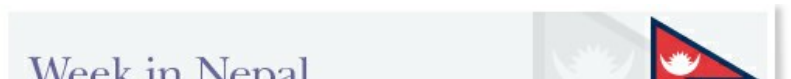
One thing we will definitely be mentioning is the headline in this morning's paper. Prince William and Kate Middleton are, by all reports, going to have their honeymoon in Nepal. Not only that, but they will be staying in the Gokharna Forest where I have been writing from all week. You can never predict who will be reading what you write.

Nepalese heavy metal - Thursday 31 March 17.49 (GMT)

This is my last evening in Kathmandu for a while. I am on a contract that means I come out to support the committee whenever they need me, which means that I already know that I will be coming back. This is a nice feeling for me, since I have a small but select group of countries that I write about academically and I am going to add Nepal to that list. The papers from the last few days - The Kathmandu Post - confirm why it is such an interesting place for someone like me. There is a lot written on conflict and security for a start, much material on the Maoists, but then the material moves into governance territory with a story about the Commissioner who runs the Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority who has been arrested for, well, abusing his authority. At the same time, there is a fabulous article about dialectic materialism and 'People's Democracy' as distinct from liberal democracy, which is like going back in time. Most spectacularly of all, I am watching a popular local band, 'X-Mantra' perform Nepali death metal with spandex and flying 'V' guitars over the Himalayas. Sometimes globalisation works in a very strange way.

In terms of the peace agreement, there are two key people left to go. Apart from that, we think we have many of the core players in place. The agreement states that any decision on the integration of the Maoists has to be unanimous, which means that any one party can delay the whole thing and that is what is happening at the minute. The key lies in reassuring the Maoists and the anti-communist Congress Party that integrating the Maoist army is the best thing to do for the peace process and keeping it separate is not an option. In this scenario it will always be a threat and the proliferation of security institutions always leads to politicisation and sometimes personalisation of those institutions which reduces everybody's security.

Sometimes this job feels like running in treacle, it is frustrating, slow, and infuriating in equal measure, but as an academic it is also deeply interesting to examine a historical moment within a country at close quarters. To be involved and to know the people is even more rewarding. Still, next week the paperwork awaits in my day job as a head of department. Much as I like my colleagues, negotiating with them does feel a bit different after negotiating with the Maoists!



(Not so) Final post - Thursday 31 March 10.38 (GMT)

I wish I could have a pound for every time people ask me if they can carry my suitcase and travel with me. Well, this week is exhibiting some of the less glamorous aspects of spending time overseas. Apart from a 23 hour journey to get here (and get back), which takes out two weekends, Nepal is 5.75 hours ahead of the UK. This is just enough to really destroy your body clock. What this means in practice is that, whereas I don't get jetlag per se, I tend to suffer from permanent tiredness along with bouts of insomnia. Added to this is the traditional stomach-destroying cuisine of Nepal and it all makes for a perfect storm of a health disaster. Still, the show must go on and a few drugs later I am in the car heading to see the Minister of Rehabilitation.

'Ananta' is the Minister's Maoist condename. All senior Maoists have condenames from wartime and they all still use them. It is a reminder of who they are and where they come from, even now they are in government. The roots of the insurgency started partly as a revolt against poverty but also against the ethnic domination of the hill groups and their domination of the caste system. Ananta is from one of these ethnic groups. We have met each other several times and have a good rapport to the extent that when I come to Nepal we always have a drink and he makes time to see me. This is not to be sniffed at since he is extremely influential in the party. At the same time, most of the senior cadres I know are fairly open about why they joined and what they want out of the peace. Most of the senior officers are either from ethnic minorities or are high caste - both Prachand and Battarai, the two most senior Maoists, are Brahmins - and the majority are well educated. Many are teachers, social workers, students or other former officials that were caught up in the movement and believed in an ideology of empowerment of the poor masses against a dominant elite that governed a country with the dubious distinction of being the most unequal in South Asia.

It is easy to see the Maoists as freedom fighters within this system and, indeed, many do. The combatants include many women and Dalits (low caste) who traditionally are disempowered by a system that writes them off as worthless. At the same time, this was a guerilla war and wars are always extremely violent. There were clear human rights violations on both sides and one of the ideas that is yet to get off the ground four years after the conflict is a human rights commission to investigate the methods employed by the security services, including torture, rape, burning villages and killing civilians, but also the Maoist methods of intimidation, killing civilians, forced recruitment in the countryside and extortion. No-one is suggesting that all people on all sides were guilty of these things, but everyone accepts that they happened and many in the security services and in the Maoist cause want to see formal investigations get underway.

For many people, a lack of human rights accountability for crimes against those they knew means they will never get over the war.

Return to Kathmandu - Wednesday 30 March 16.43 (GMT)

I am now at the end of the fifth day of my visit and have finished our workshop on the integration of the Maoists. I have also returned from the forest and back into the mad anthill that is Kathmandu. The Kathmandu valley itself is an environmental nightmare and the fragile ecosystem of the valley has been completely destroyed by the overpopulation and unregulated settlement of the city. The main issue is lack of water and the dried-up rivers that produce a rather unpleasant smell as they fill up with rubbish and other human detritus. Disease spreads quickly here.

Our meeting ended on very good terms. The progress made was well received and the Maoist contingent did what they usually do and they will return to discuss any decisions within the Politburo. At least this time they have something very clear to discuss that could mean that the Maoist Army has a way forward into either civilian life, the police or the army. Negotiations were quite difficult but once we got on to technical issues I managed to depoliticise the most sensitive areas and we made some progress.

One of the difficulties is that research shows that all of these situations are radically different and there is no clear statistical relationship across experiences of doing integration. The research does not conclude that integration is necessary for peace, but it shows that if done badly then it is likely to lead to renewed war. When done well, it concentrates on technical processes to diffuse political situations. Countries that have one war are very likely to have a return to war and this is what everyone wishes to avoid.

Decisions are also hampered by the deep schisms within Nepali politics and the plethora of parties. There are around fifteen communist parties of Nepal (CPNs) and they are all regularly elected. The current government is made up of the CPN (United Marxist Leninist) and the CPN (Maoist) - but even within the CPN (Maoist) there are clear divisions opening up and three separate factions forming. The Maoists on the committee come from two different factions - a hardline faction that talks about returning to conflict, and the more moderate, dominant faction led by Chairman Prachanda, the charismatic head of the Maoist movement. Prachanda is something of a pragmatist and also very good company, but he is facing difficult times ahead.

Let's hope we can disband the Maoist Army before anyone tries to use it again.

Whisky and hegemony - Tuesday 29 March 18.25 (GMT)

It is a bit sobering to discover how real politics work. We finished our usual day having sketched out respective party positions. However, my time in the bar consisted of in-depth research discussions about the difference between Marx and Lenin followed by the relevance of Gramsci to Nepal. Hegemony and whisky go together well, particularly if you start drinking whisky at 6 and finish at around 11.30.

I have to say that the influence of alcohol on international peace organisations is woefully under-researched. Myself, the head of the Maoists, the heads of the army and police all sorted out the issues over a bottle of Glenfidich. Tomorrow might be interesting.

Providing 'peace with honour' - Tuesday 29 March 13.12 (GMT)

I have now finished the second day of the talks and the Maoists have gone off in to the Sauna. I am not sure if Mao ever laid down any clear guidelines for Maoist takeovers of saunas, but I can sympathise with the need to blow off steam.

Effectively these talks are taking place in something of a political deadlock and the 20,000 combatants are one of the political elements that play an important role in party discussions. Like all guerrilla armies, the political wing of the Maoists, even though it is very successful in electoral terms, regards its army as a source of power. At the same time, the opposition parties view the Maoist army as a threat. Unsurprisingly disbanding this army is sensitive and difficult for all involved.

My role today in the middle of all this has been to get the different parties to think about things in a longer-term way since Nepal does not wish to see a return to conflict. It is one of the most depressing statistics in my field that if you have had a war you are very likely to have another one soon after. This can be caused by not resolving issues like this one, or alienating significant groups of former fighters. Consequently we need to design a system that provides 'peace with honour' for the combatants but provides an effective and integrated set of security services.

One that allows Maoists to attend saunas, obviously!

Into the jungle - Tuesday 29 March 03.00 (GMT)

Well, here I am having relocated from Kathmandu to a forest called Gokharna fairly close by. This is a full-on forest with tigers, rhinos, elephants and lots on monkeys. Whilst most of the tigers and rhinos are gone - shot by various royal princes - the monkeys in particular are everywhere and a notice in my room reminds me to keep doors and windows closed as they are given to stealing.

Our three day meeting here is really about trying to break the political deadlock between the new constitution of Nepal, due on May 28th, and the disbandment of the Maoist Army. My role is to advise this Government committee on a method of integrating those Maoists into the security services in a manner that is acceptable to both the services and also to the combatants. It involves constructing trust between the two armies, developing ideas for international support and also designing a robust system to make sure that we can weed out those guilty of human rights abuses. All in a day's work for a UK academic!

Arriving in Nepal - Sunday 27 March 16.45 (GMT)

23 hours after setting out, I finally crash in to my hotel room. As usual I am flying economy and my back is killing me! Two small children were playing tag in the cabin all night.

Still, I have a whole hour to get myself together and get to a two-hour meeting with the Head of the Maoist Army and his deputy. In the end the meeting lasts three hours. Fortunately I know them both and the meeting is made easier as the interpreter and my colleague are both good friends so it is effectively managed. The meeting with the Head of the Maoist Army is to provide reassurance before we go in to the forest for the three days meetings this week. This second meeting could determine the outcome of the peace negotiations and the future position of the army and police within Nepal.

My job here is to be strictly neutral and to draw on my academic knowledge and experience in Africa to provide examples of where various attempts at military integration have gone right or wrong. I am currently involved in a research programme looking at precisely this. Based at Rutgers in New Jersey my part is tracing the history of the end of Rhodesia and the start of Zimbabwe - not a good start

Someone once told me that research was real work whereas consultancy was just sticking stuff together and shoving together a report. Unfortunately if I do that, it is no exaggeration to expect some casualties and a return to violence. The history clearly shows that military integration is not sufficient to prevent future wars but if it is done badly then it results in more conflict, and no-one wants that in Nepal.

Off to the jungle tomorrow to see how we can come to some agreement. Representatives of all of the major parties, the police, the army and...me!

© University of Birmingham 2014