

THE BHUTAN IN

Don Duncan travels to Bhutan, the world's newest democracy, to meet the political leaders and militants shaping the country

THE CLIFF-PERCHED fortresses that dot Bhutan's mountainous perimeter serve as a testimony to a longstanding effort to keep out foreigners. But in the 1980s, this Buddhist nation of just 600,000 inhabitants sandwiched between China and India, found itself with what it considered a foreign problem.

Bhutan's minority population of ethnic Nepalese had mushroomed to represent one-third of the total population, causing the then king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, to launch a policy called 'one nation, one people' – a campaign that stripped many ethnic Nepalese of the Bhutanese citizenship they had acquired, and also curtailed the rights of those who were illegal. According to the US State Department and several human rights NGOs, the

significant security concern for Bhutan.

Last year, this Himalayan country became the world's newest democracy, two years after King Jigme Singye Wangchuck abdicated in favour of his son, ending almost a century of autocratic rule. By the time Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, 28, was crowned Bhutan's fifth king in November, the country's political system had been completely overhauled, with a democratically elected

‘A number of camp-dwelling refugees have formed a militancy that is gaining force and sophistication, and which could soon become a significant security concern’

campaign ended with the expulsion of 105,000 ethnic Nepalese, plus beatings, torture and murder perpetrated by the Royal Bhutan Army in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

'We left because we were scared that they would imprison us, that they would beat us, that I would be raped,' said Matimya Moktan, 41, who fled to Nepal in 1991 and now lives in a small wattle and daub hut with her three children and husband in the Beldangi I camp, one of seven refugee camps dotted across the plains of eastern Nepal.

In political limbo, somewhere on the remote margins of the diplomatic agendas of Bhutan, Nepal and India, a number of camp-dwelling refugees have formed a militancy that is gaining force and sophistication, and which could soon become a

government and a new constitution. Bhutan's king is now the head of state of a constitutional monarchy.

While the fourth king was abdicating in Bhutan, a 10-year civil war between state security forces and Maoist insurgents was coming to an end in Nepal. The success of the insurgency inspired some refugees from Bhutan to organise into radical militant groups. The groups say they receive no material support from the Maoists, but their ideological affinity is suggested by their names: the Communist Party of Bhutan, the Tiger Forces, the United Revolutionary Front of Bhutan and the United Refugee Liberation Army. Peopled by young men and women recruited from the refugee camps, these groups are intent on winning a return to Bhutan – by force, if necessary.



PHOTOS: AAP IMAGE/DON DUNCAN

AN SURGENCIES

‘The militants rendezvous in the jungle, their backpacks laden with explosives, knives, guns and Communist literature’

A protracted ‘people’s war’

‘We are preparing a protracted people’s war,’ said a 27-year-old leader of the Communist Party of Bhutan, who goes by the *nom de guerre* of Comrade Umesh. He was nine when his family was forced out of southern Bhutan, and although he has spent most of his life in exile in these camps, he said his memory of Bhutan is crystal clear and is fuelling his drive to fight back.

‘Like every Maoist struggle in the world, we use homemade weapons, explosives for ambushes. After a certain point, we will progress to a high-tech war,’ Umesh said.

For now, though, their militancy takes the form of a hodgepodge of Marxist, Leninist and Maoist ideology backed up by second-hand pistols, knives and homemade explosives. Going ‘high tech’ means acquiring automatic rifles, machine guns, powerful explosives and sophisticated detonation devices – as yet beyond the reach of this insurgency.

However, Indian intelligence sources say this may soon change, claiming the refugee groups have recently established alliances with stronger and more experienced Indian separatist groups in Sikkim and Assam, the Indian states separating Nepal and Bhutan. Groups such as the National Democratic Front of Bodoland and the United Liberation Front of Asom have been active since the early 1980s and are far stronger and more militarily advanced than the refugee insurgent groups.

‘Through these alliances, the Bhutanese refugee militants can learn how to make more powerful bombs, how to acquire superior weaponry and how

to fight more effectively,’ said an Indian intelligence official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. ‘This is something Bhutan needs to be worried about,’ he added.

But even in their current low-tech mode, these militants have managed to have an impact inside Bhutan. Comrade Umesh and his cadres frequently cross into Bhutan through the thick jungles that straddle its porous border with India. The militants rendezvous in the jungle, their backpacks laden with explosives, knives, guns and Communist literature. Frequent reports in the pages of Bhutan’s newspapers detailing the arrests of militants and the foiling of their campaigns offer a partial glimpse into this world of guerrilla operations. According to the national Kuensel newspaper, a militant training camp was uncovered by the Royal Bhutan Army in the jungles of southern Bhutan last February. Fourteen militants escaped and six were arrested, along with a weapons cache of a pistol, four rifles, four grenades and knives.

‘If all we had to show were our weapons, we wouldn’t get very far,’ Umesh said. ‘So we also run classes in Bhutan. We have lectures, teach our ideology and train cadres in explosives making and in guerrilla fighting. We are laying the groundwork in Bhutan both ideologically and militarily.’

‘I think compared to any other groups in exile, these Maoist groups seem to have greater influence inside Bhutan,’ said Sukbahadur B Subba, chairman of the Human Rights Organisation of Bhutan, which works closely with the refugees in eastern Nepal. ↘



MAIN IMAGE: Bhutan’s fifth king, and first constitutional monarch, Jigme Khear Namgyel Wangchuck, at his coronation.

ABOVE: Ethnic Nepalese children in Thimphu.

BELOW: Drukpa (native Bhutanese) boys at play.





ABOVE: A refugee holds his invalidated Bhutanese citizenship papers.

BELOW: Scenes from refugee camp Beldangi I.



Resettlement of refugees might aid insurgency

Bill Frelick, refugee policy director of Human Rights Watch in New York, said the insurgents have not yet reached a critical mass to realistically launch a revolution in Bhutan. But in addition to alliances with powerful terrorist groups in India, there are other factors that might aid the growth of this embryonic resistance.

In late 2006, the United States and a handful of other Western countries offered to resettle more than 70,000 of the 105,000 refugees. Seven thousand have already left and the remainder will be gone within four

Many Nepali ethnics resent the government for atrocities and curtailed human and civil rights

years, said the UN High Commission on Refugees.

While resettlement will reduce the refugee population by 60 per cent, Frelick believes these developments could actually aid the insurgents: 'You could end up with all the more moderate people leaving the camps and you might have a much more militant cadre of people left. The moderating influence would not be there.'

Also, remittances have started to come in from the new, developing diaspora of resettled refugees. As resettlement develops, this cash flow will continue to grow, expanding the insurgents' funding pool in the camps.

Domestically, Bhutan's Achilles heel is the estimated 100,000 ethnic Nepalese still in the country. Many resent the government for past atrocities and current curtailed rights, including denied citizenship, restrictions on movement and lack of access to state services, making them receptive to the ideas peddled by Umesh and his ilk.

'All these groups need is... maybe only 100 people with guns inside Bhutan to make a real impact,' said our Indian intelligence source. Indeed, there have been more than a dozen bombs exploded in southern Bhutan and in the capital, Thimphu, in the past year.

'This is something we are concerned about,' Ugyen Tshering, Bhutan's foreign minister, told *The*



Diplomat. Tshering recalls a bomb exploding outside his party's Thimphu office in January 2008. 'It was of sufficient power to have caused casualties; luckily it didn't.'

Despite this threat, Bhutan has been reducing the size of its army, from more than 9000 troops to fewer than 8000 in the past two years. From now on, Bhutan's leadership has said, its new weapon of choice is democracy.

According to Prime Minister Jigme Y Thinley, 'the best way a country like Bhutan can defend itself and prevent security problems has to be through the people. Bhutan cannot grow, cannot enjoy harmony,

until every citizen believes and enjoys equity and equality'.

Perhaps with that in mind, the government has begun addressing social deficiencies in state services in the predominantly ethnic Nepalese regions. Half of the 30 schools closed down in these areas since the upheavals of the early 1990s are scheduled to reopen by the end of the year.

'Within five years, there will be absolute parity in terms of the provision of services and infrastructure,' promises Mr Thinley. 'This is how we can prevent conditions for discontent and disaffection from growing in our country.'

For now, the discord continues to enter Bhutan in the backpacks of militants. According to Kuensel, the Communist Party of Bhutan was responsible for the most recent attack on Bhutanese soil – an explosion and ambush that killed four forest guards in southern Bhutan on 30 December, 2008.

'The ethnic Nepalese in Bhutan are still not fully aware – politically,' Comrade Umesh claims. 'But we are working on that. It takes time to make people aware of the suppression they live under, but once they become aware, they will be willing to join the fight.' **UD**



REPORTING ASSISTED BY THE INVESTIGATIVE FUND OF THE NATION INSTITUTE, NEW YORK.