

200,000 Nepalis gather for first Maoist rally in Kathmandu

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Their fists raised in the air and clutching red flags, An estimated 200,000 people packed the Martyrs grounds in the center of Katmandu and surrounding streets, chanting: ``Get rid of the royal regime! We want a republic state!''

KATHMANDU , Fri Jun 2, 2006

Tens of thousands of people marched from six different points on the outskirts of the capital and merged at the grounds , many berating King Gyanendra just 500 metres from the royal palace. "We will burn the crown and we will run the country," they shouted. Chants of "Gyanendra thief, leave the country" and "Hang Gyanendra" were also heard. The Maoists have held rallies outside the capital to win support since Nepal's new multi-party government last month matched an earlier ceasefire declared by the militants.

The police banned big vehicles, including buses and trucks, from entering the city limits and all vehicles around the venue. A thick line of police in riot gear protected the royal palace and Singhadurabar, the walled complex housing the prime minister's office and most ministries.

Rebel volunteers in red T-shirts were posted at the major intersection, directing traffic and pedestrians.

Rebel leaders who have for years been underground addressed the huge crowd. Prabhakar, a Maoist military commander who goes by one name, announced that the People's Liberation Army was ready to join forces with the Nepali Army. "We are willing to merge with the army if everything is settled with the government," he said.

Krishna Bahadur Mahara, the head of the Maoist peace talks team, said the rebels had been complying with a ceasefire code of conduct, but the government had not. "We have given 100 percent in implementing the code of conduct but the government has not. The government has breached the code of conduct as security forces are manning the streets carrying weapons. We are watching this with suspicion," Mahara said to applause and whistle-blowing. Mahara, , repeated calls to dissolve the recently reinstated parliament, government and constitution. "The present parliament is incapable of representing people's voice so it should be immediately dissolved. It is impossible to achieve the goals of elections to constituent assembly through the old parliament and the old constitution," he told the crowd.

``The government is trying to push the country back to conflict," Mahara told reporters. He said the government was trying to reinstate old village councils in areas where the rebels had previously disbanded them. Government troops were also back on the streets, manning checkpoints on highways and even beating up some rebels, he said. ``This is against the code of conduct the sides have signed saying armed soldiers or fighters will not be mobilized," Mahara said.

In between speakers, Maoists sang revolutionary songs and watched traditional dances. The gathering was largely peaceful, but an AFP reporter on the scene saw one man badly beaten by a Maoist mob who suspected him of being an agent provocateur.

Nepal's insurgents are in a stronger position than ever after King Gyanendra ended 14 months of direct rule last month following weeks of pro-democracy protests organized by opposition parties in concert with the rebels. The mood was festive as the rebels came into the open, many for the first time in a decade.

Forty-two-year-old Ram Prasad Humayai has been living underground since 1996 and was clearly pleased to be on the streets of the capital carrying a communist flag. "This is a great day and we are very happy," he told AFP. The mid-level cadre from Kavre district, some 35 kilometres (20 miles) from Kathmandu warned however that the rebels were ready to return to arms if needed. "If the government changes policy and if the peace talks are scrapped, there is no doubt at all that we will go back to war," said Humayai.

Friday's mass meeting marks a breakthrough in the capital for the rebels, who already control large swathes of countryside. Rebel leaders have appeared at meetings in Maoist-controlled areas in the past, but never in Kathmandu.

Dozens of soldiers carrying automatic rifles stood in front of the heavily guarded palace. Riot police maintained a vigil outside where hammer and sickle Maoist banners fluttered. Armoured cars and soldiers holding machine guns manned major road intersections.

A NEW NEPAL

Thousands of posters bearing the portraits of rebel leader Prachanda had been put up in the ancient temple-studded city, but he was not scheduled to attend the meeting. "We want to build a new Nepal," said Chhemata Biswokarma, a 20-year-old woman who had traveled 200 km to attend the Kathmandu rally. Prachanda told local journalists last week in a rare interview that the rebels would abide by the people's wishes. "We have full confidence that 99 percent of Nepalese want a Republican state," he said. "If, however, people opt for any other system in spite of our presence in the interim government we are bound to accept the verdict."