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Expelled Bhutanese turn to Mao - and guns

Ethnic Nepalese stripped of their citizenship are determined to regain their political rights through armed militant groups.



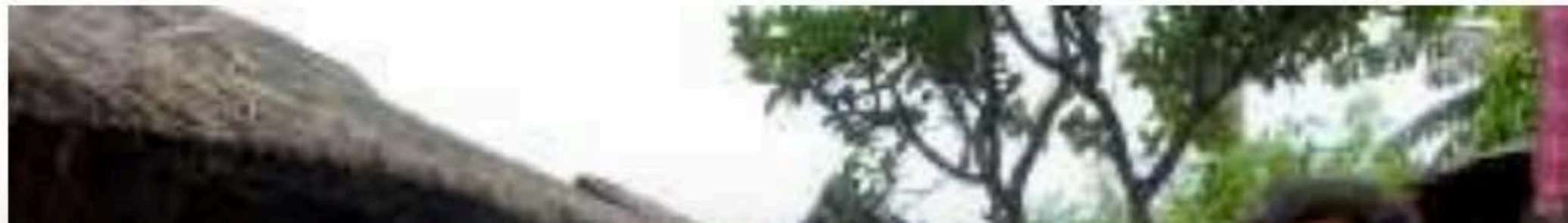
Don Duncan

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EDITOR'S PICKS



A Bhutanese refugee cleans utensils while others, below, collect water at the Beldangi camp, some 300km south-east of Kathmandu.

THIMPHU // The cliff-perched fortresses that dot this Himalayan nation's mountainous perimeter are a testimony to a long-standing effort to keep out foreigners. But in the 1980s, Bhutan, a tiny 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 kingdom, 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



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campaign ended with the expulsion of 105,000 of Bhutan's 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 went 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. These camps are where those expelled from Bhutan ended up. Locked in political limbo, somewhere on the remote margins of the diplomatic agendas of Bhutan, Nepal and India, a number of these refugees have formed militant organisations that is gaining force and sophistication and that could soon become a significant security concern for Bhutan as it takes its first shaky steps towards democracy. Last year, Bhutan became the world's newest democracy, two years after King Jigme Singye Wangchuck abdicated his throne 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 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 Nepalese Maoist insurgency inspired the refugees in these camps, some of whom began to organise into radical militant groups in the past eight years. The refugees say they receive no material support from the Maoists, but their ideological affinity is evident in the groups' names: the Communist Party of



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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 camps, these groups are intent on winning a return to Bhutan - by the gun if necessary. "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 years old 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 home-made weapons, explosives for ambushes. After a certain point, we will progress to a hi-tech war," he said.

For now, their poverty-stricken militancy is made up of second-hand pistols, knives and homemade explosives complimented by a hodgepodge of Marxist, Leninist and Maoist ideology. Moving to "high tech" means the acquisition and training in automatic rifles, machine guns, powerful explosives and sophisticated detonation devices - as yet beyond the reach of this insurgency. But Indian intelligence sources say this may soon change. According to the sources, the refugee militant groups have recently established alliances with stronger and more experienced Indian separatist groups in the states of Sikkim and Assam, located between 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 militarily more 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



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effectively," said an Indian intelligence official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he is not authorised to discuss intelligence with the media. The source monitors this restive corner of India, reporting back to New Delhi. "This is something Bhutan needs to be worried about," he said.

But even in their current low-tech mode, these militants have managed to have an effect 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 detail the arrests of militants and the foiling of their campaigns offer a partial glimpse into this world of the guerrilla operations. Last February, an entire training camp established by the militants was uncovered by the Royal Bhutan Army in the jungles of southern Bhutan, according to the country's national newspaper, Kuensel. The camp housed 20 militants, of whom 14 escaped and six were arrested with a pistol, four rifles, four grenades and knives, the newspaper reported. "If all we had to show were our weapons, we wouldn't get very far," Comrade 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 ground work 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. 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. Already, 7,000 have left and the remainder will be gone within four years, said the UN High Commission on Refugees. While resettlement will reduce the refugee population to 40 per cent of what it is now, these developments could possibly aid the insurgents, Mr Frelick said. "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 population of ethnic Nepalese who remain in the country, estimated to number up to 100,000. Comrade Umesh and the insurgents believe their foothold in Bhutan is through this disgruntled community, many of whom resent the government for past atrocities and still face curtailed rights, including denied citizenship, restrictions on movement and lack of access to state services. "All these groups need is 200, maybe only 100 people with guns inside Bhutan to make a real impact," said the Indian intelligence source. Already the disruption waged by the insurgents is significant: more than a dozen bombs exploded in southern Bhutan and in the capital over the past year. "This is something we are concerned about," said Ugyen Tshering, Bhutan's foreign minister, whose party's office was next to the site of a bomb that detonated in Thimphu in

Jan 2008. He remembers a window in the office shattering. "It was of sufficient power to have caused casualties; luckily it didn't," he said. Despite this threat, Bhutan has been reducing the size of its army, from more than 9,000 troops to fewer than 8,000 in the past two years. From now on, Bhutan's leadership has said, its new weapon of choice is democracy. "The best way a country like Bhutan can defend itself and prevent security problems has to be through the people," said Jigme Y Thinley, the prime minister. "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 of Bhutan. For example, 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. "By the end of five years, there will be absolute parity in terms of the provision of services and infrastructure," Mr Thinley said. "This is how we can prevent conditions for discontent and disaffection from growing in our country." For now, the discord continues to come into Bhutan in the backpacks of Comrade Umesh and his cadres. According to Kuensel, Comrade Umesh's militant group, 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 Dec 30. "The ethnic Nepalese in Bhutan are still not fully aware politically," Comrade Umesh said early last month. "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." * The National