

# Nepali Congress Steps Out from the Wilderness

Jan Sharma writes from Kathmandu

The question is, will it sweep the parliamentary elections?

## A Major Proposal

Over the decades, literally hundreds of proposals have been made by eminent personalities, mostly retired from public office, non-governmental organisations and even UN agencies for the reduction of arms race and the diversion of a portion of staggering funds spent on weapons to economic development in the Third World countries. While most of these proposals found little support from governments as such, the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, eventually found their own reasons to implement a series of arms control agreements and, for all practical purposes, end their cold war. To this extent, Washington and Moscow have made the world a safer place to live in.

Yet, the arms race goes on. In fact, with the end of the Gulf War, the race has been stepped up manifold. Reports of sale commitments by the United States and some other western powers to their allies in the Middle East, several Arab countries and Israel, paint a frightening picture of a new scenario unfolding in the most explosive region of the world.

Against this background, a proposal by the British Prime Minister John Major that a registrar should be kept in the United Nations recording all the arms sales may sound a feeble one. Yet, this is the only proposal of its kind, one that also reflects the concern of a big power, that has met with qualified approval from many quarters, including the United Nations.

The Major proposal—the pun is just unavoidable—should be pursued, discussed and enlarged. In the process, what has so far seemed like a US—or a western—concern over the arms race and other developments in the Middle East should be turned into a global one, with the United Nations playing a key role in the exercise. The objective should be to go beyond—far beyond—the original British proposal of maintaining the registrar of arms sale. It should be to reduce it by stages and finally to stop it within a couple of decades, if not by the turn of the century. All this may be optimistic, but it is no more optimistic than a number of incredible changes which have changed the face of the Eastern Europe.

It is important, almost essential, to link this process with the diversion of a small proportion of funds, saved from the arms sale, to the development in the Third World countries, in such areas as debt relief, the crusade against malnutrition, the fight against absolute poverty, education, health care, environmental protection and flood control. We do not need new statistics to show that even a small percentage of what an arms-supplying industrialised country earns in a year by its sale of weapons to the developing world can change the lot of starving millions in an African country, wipe out the debt of a Latin American country or fund the literacy programme in a country like Bangladesh.

If the Western powers can demonstrate just half of their dogged determination they showed in fighting and winning the Gulf War, in addressing the massive, but long-neglected, problems facing the Third World, then the British proposal will be regarded as a milestone in the long history of the relations between the industrialised nations and the Third World.

## Invest in Vets

Is Bangladesh a country of animal lovers? That would not seem to be the case when we think of the number of starved, diseased stray dogs in city streets, and the purpose and manner in which many domestic dogs and cats are used and treated. However, the country's prevailing socio-economic condition has more to do with that than an inherent lack of compassion for animals. When the average man has to worry about where his next meal is coming from, he can hardly be expected to give enough thought to the welfare of other creatures, great and small.

But should this logic extend to the medical profession? State of veterinary surgery in this country is not a healthy one suffering from lack of funds and facilities, not to mention staff. There is only one veterinary hospital in the country, which perpetually suffers from a shortage of drugs. Although there is one veterinary dispensary in each of the 460 upazilas, few, if any, has a doctor, even though three are required for proper functioning of each of such stations. The hospital in Dhaka needs at least three mobile clinics to serve distant areas but cannot get them because the money is not forthcoming.

**M**AY 12 may mark the return to power of the Nepali Congress Party, after 30 years in the wilderness.

The centrist Nepali Congress, which now enjoys the support of the middle class, swept the 1990 parliamentary elections, the kingdom's first.

In 1959, its charismatic leader, B. P. Koirala, became the first commoner to be the prime minister, traditionally held by the aristocratic Rana family, until he was sacked by the King in 1960. Today, Nepal's caretaker government is headed by the party's president, Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai.

The May elections will be Nepal's first free elections in 30 years. This time, the question is, will the Nepali Congress sweep parliamentary elections?

The Nepali Congress was briefly in power with an absolute majority following the first free elections in 1959. The Nepali Congress secured 74 seats in the 109-member parliament while the communists won only four seats.

The two political parties joined hands in February 1990 to fight for democracy. King Birendra conceded to their demands for a constitutional monarchy the following April.

Today's interim government is composed of the Nepali Congress, the United Left Front (an alliance of seven bitterly divided communist factions), independents and King Birendra's nominees.

The Nepali Congress is now in a dilemma whether it should fight the elections alone or in alliance with the United Left Front as it did during the pro-democracy movement last year.

The reputation of the Nepali Congress, which has given hope for democracy to the educated middle class, is shaking. Prime Minister Bhattarai promised hours after being sworn into office that prices will fall by 35 per cent. That never happened and, in the wake of the Gulf crisis, he increased the price of kerosene by nearly as much.

Mr. Bhattarai has said that only a single party government would be in a position to give political stability to Nepal. But he is being criticised for the recent increase in the water tax by 25 per cent and similar raise in the rates of electricity, telephones and other services on the pipeline due to pres-

ures from the World Bank. The government is also getting unpopular for its failure to maintain law and order. Due to the election fever, the situation in some townships is tense. Even Nepali Congress activists have been beaten up by members of the Male faction of the Nepali Communist Party and members of the United Left Front.

Party activists have complained to Mr. Bhattarai that his ministers do not listen to party workers, let alone consult them. Girija Prasad Koirala, Nepali Congress general secretary, has attacked the performance of the interim government. "We have not been able to fulfill our promises nor able to live up to expectations," he said.

Girija Prasad Koirala is the younger brother of B.P. Koirala who was prime minister for 18 months until the King dismissed his government in 1980. The younger Koirala is ambitious for the job of prime minister and is a rival of Mr. Bhattarai in that sense.

Some pro-Nepali Congress analysts say the communists are taking advantage of their

positions in government. The communists have appointed their party members in key government and corporate positions. The Male faction has captured most grassroots organisations which give them immense advantage in the electoral campaign.

Now comes a random opinion poll which casts a shadow on Nepali Congress claims it will sweep the elections and get absolute majority in parliament. Published by the government daily *The Gorkhapatra*, the poll was made by the Management Training and Research Centre, a private group.

The poll found that 56 per cent of respondents said no single party would emerge powerful enough to form a government by itself. The remaining 44 per cent believed the possibility of a single party forming the government. But they disagreed whether it would be the Nepali Congress or the Marxist-Leninist faction of the communists.

The survey interviewed 986 people in three cities in Kathmandu Valley, the cultural and political nerve centre of

the kingdom. It showed Prime Minister Bhattarai as the "most popular," followed by Nepali Congress "supreme leader" Ganes Man Singh.

Communist leaders followed closely, with Madan Bhandari of the Marxist-Leninist faction and its secretary-general Man Mohan Adhikari in third and fourth places, respectively.

More than 47 political parties from the extreme left to the extreme right have applied for registration with the Election Commission. Some 10.7 million Nepalis will be able to elect 205 members of the House of Representatives, the lower house of parliament. The new government has lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 years old.

The Electoral Constituency Delineation Commission has allocated parliamentary seats to each of the 75 administrative districts. Some 60,000 polling officers will be pressed into service while over 500 tons of polling materials will be transported to 13,000 polling centres all over the rugged mountain kingdom.

In anticipation of violence, authorities are deploying an

additional 60,000 security personnel during the polls. Army, police and transport and communications network will be mobilised on a massive scale for what will be the biggest democratic exercise in 10 years, following a historic national referendum in 1980.

The May elections could be keenly contested between the Nepali Congress, the Marxist-Leninist faction of the communists and the National Democratic Party composed of former leaders of the deposed "Panchayat" regime.

King Birendra's father, King Mahendra, introduced the "partyless" Panchayat system by abandoning parliamentary democracy in 1960. He was impatient with the growing popularity at home and abroad of the kingdom's first prime minister, B.P. Koirala of the Nepali Congress.

The government was dismissed, political parties were banned and leaders put behind bars. What followed was the Panchayat regime operated by corrupt, dishonest and inefficient politicians which gave a bad name for the monarchy.

In April 1990, it was deposed by the pro-democracy movement, with the agreement of the monarchy.

—Deprived Asia

## F

LOR TORRES avoids a visitor's eyes when she talks about the rape she suffered after being detained by police last June. Wearing flip flops, a scoop neck T-shirt and polyester skirt, the 20-year-old from a peasant family of 14 looks like thousand of other young, poor Peruvian women.

Her words, however, ring with the defiance of the Maoist guerrilla insurgency to which she belongs—Peru's widely feared Shining Path.

Rape is one of many tests women must pass to prove their allegiance to the movement. Torres says: "We are equal to men in this struggle. This kind of treatment just makes us stronger."

Currently Torres is in Peru's Chiclayo women's prison, 400 miles north of Lima. She is charged with blowing up a state-owned Caterpillar tractor in small Andean town.

The Shining Path has rocked Peru since 1980, when it declared war to overthrow the country's democracy and replace it with an all-powerful communist party based on Mao's revolutionary China.

Although their numbers remain small, they have spread throughout the country and are increasingly active in Peru's cities, especially Lima, the capital.

Unlike other Latin American guerrilla groups, dominated by men, the Shining Path claims nearly half its army are women. It expressly recruits women. The tactic has worked in the Andes where rising poverty and the break-up of the traditional family has left more and more women to fend for themselves.

# The Women in the Shining Trench

Robin Kirk writes from Chiclayo

Shining Path are women. The largest number are in Castro Celiblock 1 A, known as The Shining Trench.

In the Shining Trench the hero is not Che Guevara, but Chiang Ching, the iron-willed wife of Chinese leader Mao Zedong. "We consider ourselves prisoners of war, with the same obligations and rights," explains Delia Taquiri.

**Unlike other Latin American guerrilla groups dominated by men, Peru's feared Shining Path insurgency claims half its armed force are women. The movement expressly recruits women, a tactic that has found fertile ground, especially in the Andes, where mounting poverty and family breakup have left many women to fend for themselves.**



the delegate choser to lead a cellblock tour for journalists.

The Shining Path women have negotiated free run of the cellblock, so they move freely within the four-story building. The interior walls are decorated with huge murals, banners and posters, celebrating communist leaders like Lenin and Mao. Although most of these women have yet to stand trial, only six deny ties to the movement.

On a sun-drenched patio 27 women line up in military formation to shout revolutionary slogans and sing. One hymn in Chinese dates from Mao's Long March.

Only one woman does not raise her fist to punctuate the works—her arms were blown off as she was making a bomb. Doctors fitted her with one metal hook, but could not save her left eye.

Gaby and Zenaida have been selected by Shining Trench inmates to give interviews. Although they refuse to give their real names, or the charges against them, they are willing to talk about their beliefs, and why women play an important role within the Shining Path.

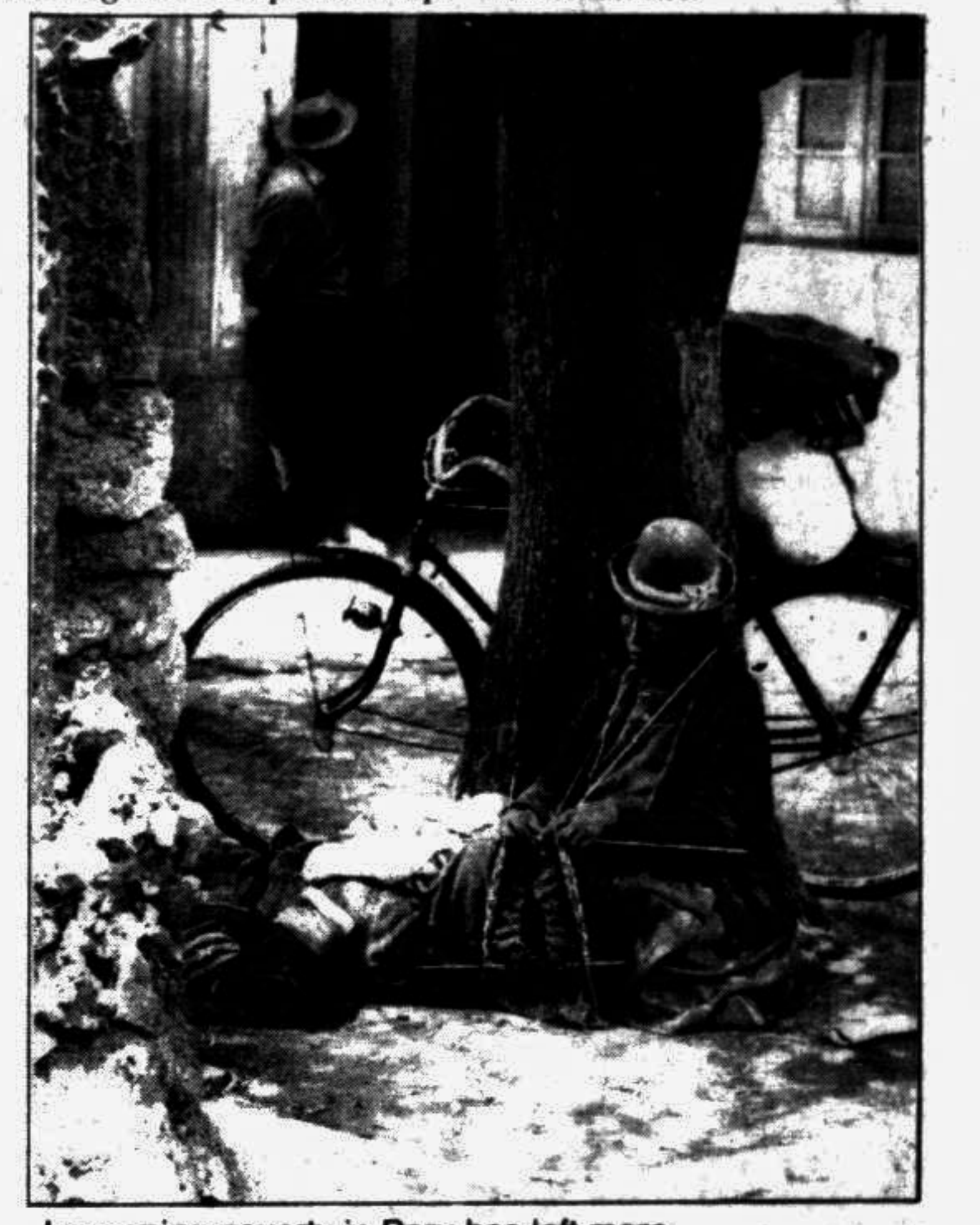
Zenaida, who has been held without trial for six years, says: "Women suffer a double exploitation, not just the misery of poverty but also for their low status as women."

What is key, however, is class, not gender: If women really want equality with men, the only way is to emancipate the masses through armed struggle.

From the beginning, women have been central to Shining Path's growth. One of its first acts was to set up a Women's Front in Ayacucho in 1968. The Shining Path was then just one of many leftist groups at the provincial University of Huamanga.

August La Torre, wife of Shining Path leader Abimael Guzman, is considered by police to be a key member of the Central Committee, the top level of this shadowy insurgency.

Those who knew the couple before they were underground call La Torre a dynamic ideologue who shone beside her more ascetic, philosophy professor husband.



Increasing poverty in Peru has left more and more women to fend for themselves

## To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

## Diarrhoea deaths

Sir, The spreading epidemic of diarrhoea in a number of districts is indeed alarming. The number of deaths due to this disease is increasing each day, as report different newspapers.

This is no doubt an hour of tragedy for us. It is most unfortunate that despite the fact that a great effort is being made at all levels to create awareness about pure drinking water, in both rural and urban areas, such a misfortune should occur and at such a large scale! Particularly sad is the situation created by the sufferings of the children.

Main cause identified for this outbreak, was the scarcity of pure drinking water, and lack of rains in the last two months in various parts of the country made it worse.

We all must remember

## Obscene magazines, videos

Sir, Our respectable President, Prime Minister, Ministers, Politicians, Educationists and other important personalities off and on put emphasis on the importance of preserving our own cultural traits and values. They always suggest and advice us not to be influenced or tempted by the odd sides of the alien culture. But I am afraid if they are aware about certain things which are seriously contributing to destroy our own cultural values and the character of our young generation.

For instance, the newspaper stands are flooded with obscene magazines, books and journals. Indian magazines are on open sale. These magazines are not only producing negative impact on the minds of our people but also affecting the marketing of clean, decent country magazines and books. For example, a fortnightly magazine, 'Ghorsanger' edited by Ms Subarna Mustafa has to suspend its publication because it is facing marketing problem. People are more interested to buy 'Sananda', an Indian magazine.

## OPINION

### An Executive's Notes

While working as a Member of the Directing Staff at the erstwhile Bangladesh Administrative Staff College, I was lucky to be selected for a German Foundation Fellowship (DSE) for a period of about one month (1978). Our main venue was in Berlin West, where our course was on "Training of Trainers". Our residential accommodation, the Offices of the German Foundation (DSE), restaurant facilities, and the Seminar/Conference facilities were all in the same building. The participants were from Asia and the Pacific.

Among the resource persons was Mr. Nitesh De, a famous personality of India in the area of Labour Problems and Management Education. During the period of two weeks that he was with us his erudite knowledge, profundity of thought, incisive analysis, and lucid expositions were almost a wander to us. He used to come to the Seminars with a simple shirt and trousers, and a pair of sandals. During the entire period of two weeks, I did not see Mr. De going out of the building. But on the other hand my friend Hossain and myself made many journeys to the Ku Dam trying to find out the many forbidden sights, as well as the social and cultural ones, both in East Berlin and in West Berlin. Together with the sight seeing, my friend Hossain and myself were on shopping expeditions, whenever we had a little time. We tried to make our trip a pleasurable one, in spite of the very tough and methodical German Course Director we had. Mr. Nitesh De spent his entire time either listening carefully to the proceedings of the Seminar and making out very extensive notes. But at some points he took permission from the Chair, and made comments which were profound and illuminating. It is only with such dedicated persons that a country can progress towards excellence, education and culture.

The learning process of an executive is a continuous one, and this is not everybody's cup of tea. Management par excellence can only be achieved by years of experience, hard work, and a continuous process of education. In this competitive world, 'excellence in management' are the key words of success and progress.

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