A Fine Balance

The government of Nepal on Friday (February 27) declared around 8,000 people who lost their lives in the course of the Maoist insurgency, Jana Andolan II and the Madheshi movement as martyrs.

Though the provision of relief and compensation to the families of the newly-declared martyrs is yet to be decided, as per the existing provision, each martyr family receives Rs.1 million in compensation. If all the families are paid, the government will have to cough up Rs.8 billion from its coffers.

As it is, the criteria for deciding who is a martyr and who is not remains vague. Some entrants in the new list of martyrs have only made the water murkier. For instance, the list includes noms de guerre; and some names have no family background. A few are included as "Mongolian" or "Madheshi". According to The Post sources, most of the names were forwarded by the 75 district-level committees of the Maoists.



Prachanda, the chairman of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and Prime Minister of Nepal.

The families of those who lost their lives in the conflict should most certainly receive compensation from the state. But this should have been done according to the principles established in the peace agreements signed by the parties in the course of the peace process. The Maoist-led government is keener on declaring their cadres who died during the conflict as martyrs rather than taking measures for the restitution of peace.

The peace agreements of the past three years state clearly that the government will discover the whereabouts of the disappeared during the conflict, prosecute those guilty of human rights violations, rehabilitate the internally displaced and take other measures to promote long-term peace. The government has paid little attention to these.

That the move to declare their dead cadre martyrs should take precedence over other provisions in the peace agreements demonstrates that the Maoists wish to revise the narrative regarding Nepal's recent history. The current narrative holds that the Maoists were unable to achieve a decisive victory and had to ally with other political parties in order to enter mainstream politics.

All parties are supposed to have joint responsibility in the journey ahead. However, the Maoists, by having the state declare their cadres as martyrs but ignoring provisions in the peace agreement, are declaring that their accession to the helm of power constitutes success of the revolution, and that cooperation with the other parties was only tactical and can now be ignored.

Even if the Maoists declare all those killed during the conflict as martyrs and provide compensation to their families, this is not enough to heal a society torn apart by war. Justice is as important as financial compensation, if not more. The whereabouts of those disappeared need to be found, and those responsible for severe human rights violations need to be held accountable. Only then will justice be served. Only then will the families of those killed or disappeared gain a sense of closure and be able to move on with their lives.

The recent government move raises a number of other questions. How can people with no names be declared martyrs; and if compensation is provided to their families, who will pocket the money? With such a large number of people getting martyrdom, how will the government ensure more claims are not made on spurious grounds in the future? Is it not for responsible government bodies, rather than district committees of a particular political party, to investigate the claims of martyrdom? And in case the armed political outfits now operating in the Tarai come to the negotiating table and demand that their fallen comrades be given martyr status, on what grounds will the government deny them?

--Editorial Desk, The Kathmandu Post.