

# People's Liberation Army post-2006: integration, rehabilitation or retirement?

Chiranjibi Bhandari

How to contain, disarm, rehabilitate and reintegrate members of the Maoist People's Liberation Army (PLA) were key questions after the end of the decade-long Maoist conflict in November 2006. But the principal actors remained divided on the modalities of the demilitarisation process and it took nearly five years before agreement could be reached on the ultimate fate of the PLA soldiers.

## Statutory provisions for demilitarisation

Three major peace process documents came one after another at the end of the war that were central to the post-war fate of the Maoist rebel fighters: the *Comprehensive Peace Accord* (CPA – 21 November 2006); the *Agreement on the Monitoring of the Management of Arms and Armies* (AMMAA – 8 December 2006); and the Interim Constitution of Nepal (15 January 2007). All of these dealt with the future of the 'Maoist Army' (as the PLA was referred to). Section 4 of the CPA addressed the 'Management of Army and Arms' while the AMMAA detailed the procedural and technical provisions related to that. Both agreements were included as Schedule 4 of the Interim Constitution.

Between February and March 2007, seven cantonments and 21 sub-cantonments were set up across the country to house the Maoist fighters. Arms monitors from the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) were deployed to supervise the management of arms and armed personnel of both the Nepali Army and the PLA. Thereafter began the verification process by UNMIN of all combatants in the cantonments. UNMIN also chaired the Joint Monitoring Coordination Committee (JMCC), the body consisting of members of the Nepali Army and the PLA that was responsible for ensuring compliance with the CPA and the AMMAA by both sides.

The CPA and the Interim Constitution also had a provision for a special committee to 'supervise, integrate and rehabilitate' the combatants of the Maoist Army. The cross-party Special Committee for Supervision, Integration and Rehabilitation of Maoist Army Combatants was formed after the election to the first Constituent Assembly in April 2008.

The significance of the Special Committee's role increased dramatically with the withdrawal of UNMIN on 15 January 2011 at the behest of the government [see article on

*international support for peace and transition in Nepal p.27*].

A crisis was averted when an agreement was reached between the government and the Unified Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (UCPN-M) on the eve of UNMIN's withdrawal, granting the oversight role for monitoring of combatants, cantonments and weapons to the Special Committee. Accordingly, on 22 January 2011, all the combatants came under the charge of the Special Committee.

## Endless differences

The fate of the ex-combatants in the cantonments was subject to debate and discussion for close to five years, with both sides refusing to compromise on their respective stances. The major issues of contention revolved around the integration of the PLA into the Nepali Army, the handover of Maoist armaments and the mode of rehabilitation. Table 2 outlines the contrasting positions held by the two sides.

“ **The concept of voluntary retirement was unique and is not part of common international practice.** ”

Despite continuing differences, there was some progress such as the December 2009 agreement on the discharge of minors and late recruits (see Table 3 for definitions). Accordingly, over January and February 2010, 4,008 combatants were disqualified due to their age or time of recruitment. Other disagreements were finally resolved in November 2011 with the *Seven-Point Agreement*, which outlined three options for ex-combatants: 1) integration into the Nepali Army; 2) rehabilitation; and 3) voluntary retirement. The agreement also specified that up to 6,500

**Table 1: Agreements and activities related to the PLA**

Agreements/Activities	Date signed
King Gyanendra concedes power and reinstates House of Representatives	24 April 2006
CPN-Maoist declares unilateral three-month ceasefire	27 April 2006
Girija Prasad Koirala takes office as prime minister and invites Maoists for talks	30 April 2006
Agreement on Code of Conduct for Ceasefire	26 May 2006
Government and Maoists invite UN to manage arms and troops	4 July 2006
<i>Six-Point Agreement</i> between Seven-Party Alliance and CPN-Maoist on arms management and other political issues	8 November 2006
<i>Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA)</i>	21 November 2006
<i>Agreement on the Monitoring of the Management of Arms and Armies (AMMAA)</i>	8 December 2006
Interim Constitution promulgated	15 January 2007
United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) established	23 January 2007
Verification of Maoist combatants	15 June to 27 December 2007
Formation of Special Committee for Supervision, Integration and Rehabilitation of Maoist Army Combatants	28 October 2008
Formation of Technical Committee of Special Committee	16 April 2009
Agreement to discharge disqualified combatants	16 December 2009
Discharge process	7 January to 8 February 2010
UCPN-M formal handover of cantonments to Special Committee	22 January 2011
<i>Seven-Point Agreement</i>	01 November 2011
Distribution of first and second instalments of voluntary retirement package	1 to 14 January 2012; 31 October to 10 November 2012
Integration process into the Nepali Army	5 July to 20 November 2012
Special Committee dissolved	12 April 2013

Maoist combatants would be integrated into the Nepali Army, but only if they fulfilled its 'fixed standards' for entry – although there was some relaxation of these standards in terms of age, educational attainment and marital status.

### Integration, rehabilitation or retirement?

By the time of the *Seven-Point Agreement*, the number of combatants had decreased considerably. A total of 32,250 combatants had entered the cantonments at the beginning

**Table 2: Contrasting positions vis-à-vis the PLA**

Issue	UCPN-M	Other political parties
Number	The maximum possible number into the Nepali Army	The minimum possible number into the Nepali Army
Modality	Entry into the Nepali Army as a group	Entry into the Nepali Army as individuals
Norms	Assumption of PLA as an established army, so no need to follow the Nepali Army's recruitment criteria	Nepali Army's basic criteria need to be met to enter the army
Determination of rank	Recognition of existing PLA rank	Nepali Army to determine rank, following the completion of necessary basic training course
Model of rehabilitation and voluntary retirement	Voluntary retirement scheme with attractive cash package	Priority on rehabilitation, focusing on capacity and skill development of combatants for dignified life in society
Arms handover	After completing the peace process	Before the combatants integrate into the Nepali Army

of the peace process. Only 19,602 had got through the verification process conducted by UNMIN: 8,640 were absent during verification and a further 4,008 were disqualified for being minors (2,973) or late recruits (1,035). When the regrouping process began along the three options outlined in the *Seven-Point Agreement* (integration, rehabilitation and voluntary retirement), 94 combatants were recorded as being dead, suspended or having deserted. A further 2,456 were found missing, a fact that led to some tensions at the political level, particularly on the perceived misuse of allowances that had been provided on the basis of the headcount of combatants.

Of those remaining, initially 9,702 chose integration into the Nepali Army and 7,344 voluntary retirement; only six opted for rehabilitation. These choices also reflected a simmering internal rift within the UCPN-M, between factions led by party leader Prachanda (which favoured integration) and Vice-Chair Mohan Baidya Kiran (which favoured voluntary retirement). The latter saw integration in the terms agreed as a humiliating choice for ex-combatants and a new form of recruitment for the national army. The number of those in favour of joining the army declined still further after the Special Committee allowed combatants to take the final decision over their own fate: in the second and

third rounds of the process, only 3,123 and then 1,460 decided to go for integration. Indeed 38 of these later chose voluntary retirement due to health or other reasons. The final tally of ex-combatants who opted for the army was only 1,422 (104 of whom were women), while 15,630 sought to reintegrate back into society.

The concept of voluntary retirement was unique and is not part of common international practice. International actors and donor agencies had in fact rejected such an option given the experience of the lethal combination of money, guns and combatants in other post-conflict societies. Their emphasis was more on the rehabilitation package that consisted of around three dozen schemes related to formal and vocational education.

“ Given international donors’ hesitancy about the cash package, the Government of Nepal had to come up with the funds from the national treasury.”

**Table 3: Ex-combatant facts and figures**

Registration and verification process by UNMIN	Total	Male	Female
Number of registered combatants	32,250		
Absent during the verification process (automatically disqualified)	8,640		
Disqualified combatants (minors and late recruits)	4,008	2,791	1,217
<i>Minors (born after 25 May 1988)</i>	2,973	1,987	986
<i>Late recruits (who joined the PLA after 25 May 2006)</i>	1,035	804	231
Number of combatants verified	19,602	15,756	3,846
Number of weapons registered and stored in the containers	3,475		
Number of combatants in 2011, after verification by the Special Committee	Total	Male	Female
Number of combatants absent in the regrouping process	2,456		
Dead, suspended and deserted	94		
Total number of combatants present during the categorisation process	17,052	13,494	3,558
Total number of combatants selected for integration (percentage)	1,422 (8.3%)	1,318 (9.8%)	104 (2.9%)
Total number of combatants opting for voluntary retirement (percentage)	15,624 (91.6%)	12,170 (90.2%)	3,454 (97.1%)
Total number of combatants opting for rehabilitation (percentage)	6 (0.04%)	6 (0.04%)	0 (0%)

Source: UNMIN, 2007 and the Secretariat of Special Committee, 2012



Maoist combatants celebrate the 8th PLA day at the Hattikhori cantonment in Nawalparasi district, February 2009. © Kiran Panday

The rehabilitation option proved to be the least attractive, however, with just six ex-combatants choosing it. And, contrary to the assumptions and expectations of both national and international stakeholders, voluntary retirement proved to be overwhelmingly popular, with 90 per cent of the ex-combatants deciding to take the one-time cash payments that ranged from NPR 500,000–800,000 (approximately USD \$5,000–8,000) depending on rank. Given international donors' hesitancy about the cash package, the Government of Nepal had to come up with the funds from the national treasury.

Despite all the delays in the demilitarisation process for the PLA, Maoist former combatants were successfully demobilised. And, unlike in many other post-conflict societies, there has been no violation of the peace process; nor was there any challenge from the ex-combatants to decisions made by the government or the Special Committee. At present, a number of former members of the PLA are active in all the Maoist political factions, but a significant majority are not and appear quite alienated from party politics, primarily as a result of the many fissures seen in the party they had fought for.

It is believed that 15 to 20 per cent of the ex-fighters are working as migrant labourers in the Gulf and other countries. Of those who have settled down in Nepal, most reside near the cantonments that were home to them for five years, and where there are better facilities and livelihood options compared to their own places of origin. Yet, there are questions about continued discrimination against ex-combatants and the problem of integrating them into the very social order dominated by exclusion on the basis of caste, class and gender, which these former guerrillas sought to fundamentally transform and dismantle. [see interviews with Suk Bahadur Roka and Lila Sharma on pp.50 and 52]

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Chiranjibi Bhandari is a member of the faculty at the Department of Conflict, Peace and Development Studies, Tribhuvan University. He also works as training, monitoring and evaluation coordinator for the Combatants to Peacemakers Programme at Pro Public, Kathmandu. Between 2011 and 2013, he served at the Secretariat of Special Committee for Supervision, Integration and Reintegration of Maoist Army Combatants. He also worked as an expert for the Nepal Peace Trust Fund on cantonment management and rehabilitation of ex-combatants in 2013.