

Past misdeeds return to haunt Nepal army

With just a fortnight left for the ouster of Nepal's King Gyanendra, the army that had once been allowed to perpetrate gross human rights violations in the name of combating the Maoist insurgency is now facing a backlash with its past crimes catching up with it.

The massacre of three dozen unarmed labourers six years ago that was hushed up and never brought to justice has now come back to haunt the barracks with Nepal's apex court Monday ordering the government to pay compensation for the killings, open an investigation and punish the guilty soldiers.

In February 2002, about eight months after King Gyanendra ascended the throne, the then Royal Nepal Army (RNA) that had been called in to suppress the Maoist guerrilla movement killed 36 labourers building an airport in remote Kalikot district under the mistaken assumption that they were insurgents.

The massacre was hushed up and the perpetrators were never brought to justice.

The Kalikot massacre was one among a series of mass murders committed by the RNA with impunity due to the royal patronage it enjoyed.

A year ago, after the fall of King Gyanendra's army-backed regime, an NGO and an individual moved the Supreme Court asking for justice.

The Forum for Human Rights and Democracy and Jagdeep Thapa jointly sought to justice for the victims of the Kalikot massacre as well as the murder of Thapa's father Umesh Chandra Thapa in 2006.

Thapa, a supporter of the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist that was opposing King Gyanendra's absolute reign, was killed by the army while returning home after taking part in a public protest against a farcical municipal election held by the king that was boycotted by over 95 percent of parties.

Since the end of the king's reign, a series of cases were filed by the relatives of other victims killed by the army during the 10-year civil war.

However, though the courts ordered punishment for the guilty soldiers, the new government, despite having the Maoists on it, has so far failed to bring a single soldier to justice.

It has also failed to disclose the fate of over 1,000 people missing since they were arrested by security personnel and form a commission to investigate the disappearances.

Though the victims were mostly Maoist cadres and sympathisers, the former rebels have not been pushing for justice, apparently dogged by the fear that such a commission would also seek to punish their own guerrillas, who too were involved in gross crimes against civilians during the insurgency.

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