

## Maoist chief triggers fresh arms controversy

Nepal's Maoist leader Prachanda has created a fresh controversy by reportedly saying that thousands of rebel soldiers and arms still remained outside cantonments, which goes against an accord between the rebels and the government.

The guerrilla chief, who is also the supreme commander of the guerrillas' 'People's Liberation Army', is said to have made the statement while speaking in western Baglung district Monday. The Kathmandu Post on Wednesday quoted Prachanda as saying that he was being satirical and had been misunderstood by the media.

Prachanda lived underground for nearly two decades without trouble but now that he is addressing public gatherings frequently, he is kicking up one controversy after another, affecting the credibility of the guerrillas.

The statement made the UN, a party to the weapons accord between the rebels and Nepal's seven-party government, express concern.

According to the arms pact signed this year, the guerrillas have pledged to corral all their soldiers in 28 barracks and lock up arms under UN supervision.

Last week, the UN said it had registered a little over 31,000 soldiers and about 3,400 arms.

The UN statistics has caused widespread doubts that the Maoists, contrary to the pact, are still keeping a large number of weapons outside the camps for their own use.

The local media has published photographs of Maoist cadres attending their leaders' meetings with guns and clashes between the rebels and their opponents continue in the Terai plains with the rebels using firearms.

Prachanda's statement lent credence to the reservations expressed by the US government repeatedly that the Maoists are yet to lay down all their arms.

'Maoists still have technical human resources outside the cantonments who have the ability to launch massive attacks simultaneously at several places on a single night,' the Kathmandu Post daily and its sister publication Kantipur reported Tuesday.

Reacting to the reports, Ian Matrin, the UN envoy overseeing the peace negotiations in Nepal, said the UN Mission in Nepal is concerned about the media reports quoting Prachanda.

'It is essential that all unlicensed firearms still in the community, whether held by those associated with the CPN (Maoist) or by other groups or individuals, be brought under the control of the police in order to assist in establishing a climate conducive to free and fair elections for the constituent assembly,' Martin said in a statement issued by his office.

He also said any reports of unregistered Maoist army weapons outside the cantonment sites will be investigated and would be treated as a violation of existing agreements.

The UN envoy also said he had raised the reports with the Maoists, who had called them incorrect.

Within a week, two earlier statements by the Maoist chief have raised the concern of the US government, the Nepal government and Nepal's royal palace.

The Maoist chief said the palace was plotting to kill US officials in order to put the blame on his party.

Nepal's Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula called the statement 'astonishing' while the US said the rebels should furnish proof or retract the comment as malicious.

The final reproof came from Nepal's palace with King Gyanendra's press secretariat calling the allegations baseless, malicious and unfounded.

*Sudeshna Sarkar* ( © IANS / India eNews)