

**Representative of the Secretary-General Ms. Karin Landgren's interview with Kantipur daily (Sunday, 7 June 2009)**

**“Re-verification will not help the peace process”**

*For four months since Ian Martin, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, retired from his post, Karin Landgren has been leading the United Nations Mission in Nepal. Since the Maoist chairman's videotape was made public, various speculations have been made regarding UNMIN's role. In this context, Gopal Khanal and Khim Ghale of Kantipur spoke to Ms Landgren about the future of the Maoist army combatants and the peace process.*

**You have been UNMIN chief for four months. How has your experience been so far?**

This is a very critical moment. We have met as many people as possible during this period. We have maintained special relations/contact with more or less the entire political leadership, which has been helpful. The past two months have been particularly sensitive. As always, we have been working to take the peace process in the right direction. Following some important achievements made under Ian Martin's leadership, UNMIN has been reduced in size. His experience has also helped me.

**UNMIN's role is to take the peace process to a logical conclusion. How difficult is it?**

I have also worked in other countries. I have worked in the former Yugoslavia. But the positive aspect here is that all parties are in dialogue with one another. This is a remarkably positive feature compared to other situations. Despite the difficulties, all political parties are in dialogue. Dialogue has continued even in the background. It's true that the public perception is that relations between the political parties appear bitter and hostile. But the media here is vibrant and this is a positive thing. The parties have yet to fully address the requirements of the peace process. In this phase the media has an important role in establishing a democratic process. I still have hope in the commitment of the Nepali people and the political parties to taking the peace process to a conclusion.

**The peace process started three years ago. What stage are we in now?**

To put it plainly, the negotiations were very difficult. The repeated postponement of the election made it even more difficult. Even after the election it took four months to form a government. Then there were many difficulties at the beginning of the constitution drafting process. Looking back, 2008 was a very important year. Some major achievements were made. There were difficulties at every level. It is encouraging that the parties have continuously been in dialogue since then.

**What are the main challenges of the peace process?**

It is necessary to establish some procedures for taking the peace process forward. Some of the provisions of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement have still not been implemented. A mechanism for monitoring the implementation of the peace agreement should have been built, which has not happened yet. In 2006 recommendations were made for forming a high-level political mechanism. This was only formed at the end of 2008. Two important tasks are yet to be done – writing a new constitution and deciding the future of the Maoist army combatants. There are still two separate armies. This process cannot move forward without the Maoists' participation in dialogue. Forming a high-level political mechanism for this would be the best way to move forward.

The Common Minimum Programme mentions a commission for peace and reconstruction. It again talks about a mechanism for monitoring the peace process. This mechanism is necessary for

the peace process. Right now the trading of political accusations has made it difficult for the peace process to move forward. A monitoring mechanism is important for addressing the challenges in the implementation of the peace agreement.

It is now time to hold high-level discussions about the integration and rehabilitation of the Maoist army combatants. The peace agreement mentions this only in general terms. After the formation of a Special Committee, a technical committee was formed in March this year. These are important. They have been holding regular discussions. But they do not have a clear political mandate. This is necessary. It is important to make a political decision about the former Maoist combatants. This is an extremely challenging issue. Therefore, such a decision should be made at the highest political level. It is important to address the questions of how many combatants will join the security forces and when, what are the established criteria, will they be integrated individually or collectively, how many will be rehabilitated into society. These are not just technical issues; they need to be addressed politically.

**Maoist chairman Prachanda's videotape drew UNMIN into controversy. What is your response to this?**

At the time the videotape was made public, I had gone to New York to report to the Security Council. I returned to Kathmandu as soon as possible. I met Prachanda twice on the same day to discuss this matter. The videotape statement on the combatants was indeed troubling. It also generated reactions to UNMIN's role and the verification process. According to the clarification Prachanda gave me, the address was made in a different context. He said it was made in a very particular context. I don't want to elaborate on his clarification here. But it is UNMIN's responsibility to speak clearly about the verification process.

It is UNMIN's duty to help implement the agreement made between the political parties. The parties have agreed to verify the combatants on the basis of two benchmarks. The agreement stated that those who were recruited in the Maoist army before the ceasefire and were eighteen years old prior to the ceasefire would be considered Maoist combatants. These were the questions that were asked at the time. The combatants were required to prove that they were Maoist army combatants during personal interviews.

The Joint Monitoring Coordination Committee had discussed and agreed on the questions to be asked and other procedures. Also, UNMIN had regularly been updating the committee on the progress of the work. We had even taken a team of government representatives on a field visit so they could observe the verification process. Many high ranking leaders had observed the process.

**In the report you submitted to the Security Council, you said the Nepali Congress had also agreed to remove Army chief Katawal. Why did you submit such a report at a time when the Congress had been publicly opposing the move?**

In the report I only wrote that "it has been said..." The context was slightly different then. Prachanda was saying that he was working on the basis of consensus. It is a different question whether or not he actually had the Nepali Congress's support on this issue. But I had been told that he was working on the basis of consensus. That is why I cited the statement as "it has been said". I regret that this has been interpreted otherwise. I also met Nepali Congress leaders including Sushil Koirala and Ram Sharan Mahat. I am willing to discuss any issues with them.

**The Congress has raised the issue of re-verification. What do you have to say about this?**

For this we would need to look to the Special Committee. Its decision can be significant. It is important for us to understand what kind of process re-verification would entail. If we are to go for re-verification, what should we do with the decisions made earlier? These are complex

questions. Also, it would be meaningless to carry out verification with the preconception that only 8,000 are combatants. This would be a tough exercise. In practical terms, verification is a long and expensive process. I'd like to tell the parties that this will be a waste of resources and time. Instead, during this time we could do a lot of work on the future of the combatants. Re-verification will not help the peace process. The parties should take this into account.

**The combatants deemed ineligible are still in the cantonments. Is UNMIN concerned about this?**

Our position is that they should be brought out immediately. Doesn't the government have any responsibility towards them? That is the government's responsibility. As for the United Nations and the international community, our responsibility is to monitor arms and armies. We have been regularly holding discussions about the discharge of ineligible combatants, particularly the minors. In technical terms, more than 4000 are child soldiers. We want their social rehabilitation. Earlier Prime Minister Prachanda had said he would do this but this did not happen. Our responsibility is to try to bring them out of cantonments. They should not be kept there even one day more.

**What might be the appropriate solution for managing the Maoist army combatants?**

We are not in a position to say which solution might be appropriate. As the peace process is now at a difficult juncture, it is important for everyone to act in accordance with the peace agreement. Some have also been saying that certain provisions of the peace agreement need not be implemented as they are no longer relevant. But the agreement determines the process. It is the agreement that talks about the integration and rehabilitation of the former Maoist combatants. Only a couple of days ago I met the defence minister. I found her to be wholly committed to the peace agreement and we discussed the issue of integrating Maoist combatants into the Nepal Army. Therefore, I repeat – this is a task for senior political actors. They should address the questions of whether or not to merge them with the army, the options of the police, armed police, border security police, etc. that are being put forward now, as well as how they will be rehabilitated.

**Hasn't the defence minister publicly said that there should be no integration?**

First, it is the responsibility of the Special Committee to decide this issue. The defence minister is aware of the provisions in the constitution. During our conversation she did not say anything about denying the legitimacy of integration.

**What would be UNMIN's role in the process of integration or rehabilitation?**

We are willing to provide support. We have been working closely with the technical committee. We have also been studying the contexts of other countries. The United Nations has worked on integration and social rehabilitation in many places. UNMIN can offer technical advice on this. We don't advise simply replicating the process of this or that country. This is not possible, either. Every country has a different context. However, we have long experience in this area. This is why former Prime Minister Prachanda had requested the international community, including UNMIN and the UN Secretary General, to facilitate this process. This is what we have been doing constantly. Third, we would also have to provide support for social rehabilitation.

**The Maoists are in opposition. Don't you think the peace process will be in limbo with the Maoists in opposition?**

I made this point in the Security Council: can the issue of the Maoist combatants and the peace process in general be resolved in a satisfactory manner with the Unified CPN (Maoist) in opposition? Does this bode well for the combatants and the new constitution? On the other hand,

I have repeatedly told the Maoists that they should stop obstructing the legislature-parliament. I have told them that they should let the house function if they are committed to democracy.

At this critical juncture there is a deficit of trust between the parties. It seems people's confidence in the parties and the system has also diminished. Implementation is more important than commitments. Two weeks ago I visited the Maoist army cantonment in Kailali. I spoke to the deputy commander there. He said they would not be provoked into action and would not provoke anyone else. This is positive.

**The government's Common Minimum Programme states that the combatants' allowances will be directly deposited in the bank. On the other hand the Maoists are carrying out protests centred on the capital and district headquarters. Won't these incidents jeopardise the peace process?**

There is a possibility of serious confrontation. It is true that the peace process is in danger. Some Maoist leaders have told me that it is their impression the current government's first priority is to overturn the decisions made by the previous government. This kind of perception will not create a good atmosphere. I must say that just declaring that bandas will be peaceful does not make them so in practice. This is not a time for provocative action. This is a time to seriously seek solutions at the negotiating table.

**Right now there is polarisation between the Maoists and the other forces. Where will this lead the peace process?**

We have to hold discussions with every political party and with citizens with different opinions. In every party there are individuals with a positive outlook towards the peace process. I think the people have substantial awareness and that they are sufficiently "moderate" towards the peace process. The people can come together. But there is also some danger as you suggested. I have talked to many people. I found them worried. They are hoping that politics will return to a path of consensus through a narrowing of differences. I am delighted that there is dialogue going on in the background in order to take this peace process forward. This will shape the form it takes.

**A picture of hopelessness lies before us. What is your advice to the government and the parties in this situation?**

It is important to pay attention to two things to make the peace process successful. First, the continued existence of two armies must be resolved. Due to internal politics and government formation, the peace process remains suspended and paralysed at this point. Discussions about the drafting of the constitution and the issue of the Maoist combatants must move forward immediately. A high-level political mechanism and a mechanism for monitoring the peace process could play a constructive role. I am impressed by the work done by the Joint Monitoring Coordination Committee (JMCC). It has brought the Nepal Army and the Maoist Army together to discuss their views and understandings regarding the peace agreement and the armies. There are other provisions in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that have not been implemented yet. For example, ending impunity and finding the whereabouts of the disappeared. I request the parties to pay special attention to these issues.

**You met Prime Minister Madhav Nepal. How hopeful are you about the building of New Nepal?**

The prime minister expressed his commitment to the peace process, the peace agreement and the politics of consensus. He also said that he is willing to play whatever role is necessary to take the peace process to a logical conclusion.

**UNMIN's mandate is coming to an end. What do you think about whether to extend it or not?**

I am not allowed to put forward my views on this matter because this has to be decided by Nepal's political parties and the government. It is not in the hands of UNMIN. It depends on the Secretary General, the Security Council and the Government of Nepal. It is unlikely that the issue of integration and rehabilitation of the combatants will be resolved by 23 July. We will wait and see whether or not there will be a request to extend our mandate.