

Realities and Images of Nepal's Maoists after the Attack on Beni¹

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1. The background to Maoist military attacks on district headquarters

“Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun” – Mao Tse-Tung’s slogan grabs the reader’s attention at the top of its website.² As the slogan indicates, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) has been giving priority to strengthening and expanding its armed front since they started the People’s War on 13 February 1996. When they launched the People’s War by attacking some police posts in remote areas, they held only home-made guns and *khukuris* in their hands. Today they are equipped with more modern weapons such as AK-47s, 81-mm mortars, and LMGs (Light Machine Guns) purchased from abroad or looted from the security forces. The Maoists now are not merely strengthening their military actions, such as ambushing and raiding the security forces, but also murdering their political “enemies” and abducting civilians, using their guns to force them to participate in their political programmes.

1.1. The initial stages of the People’s War

The Maoists developed their army step by step from 1996. The following paragraph outlines how they developed their army during the initial period of three years on the basis of an interview with a Central Committee member of the CPN (Maoist), who was in charge of Rolpa, Rukum, and Jajarkot districts (the Maoists’ base area since the beginning). It was given to Li Onesto, an American journalist from the *Revolutionary Worker*, in 1999 (Onesto 1999b).

Squad-level forces consisting of 7 to 9 persons were formed during the Second Plan of the People’s War which started six months after the initiation. During the period of the Second Plan, lasting for a year, 32 squads were formed in three districts. This Central Committee member said “these squads were more quantitative than qualitative and armed with only homemade guns. After the squads were formed the main goal was to convert

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² www.cpnm.org

the zone here into a guerrilla zone.” Accordingly, the main actions taken by the Maoists during this period were ambushes on police forces and raids on police posts. The Third Plan started 18 months after launching the People’s War, i.e. around August 1997. According to this interview, “the target of this plan was to improve their military strength and power”. The Maoists managed a military training programme and collected guns and ammunition in three ways, by producing, buying, and capturing. During this period more military actions were launched. In the Third Plan some squads were sent to other regions. After the government launched the counter insurgency police operation called “Kilo Sierra 2” in their affected area in 1998, the fourth expanded meeting of the Central Committee of the CPN (Maoist) decided to start the Fourth Plan under the stage of strategic defence. The main slogan of this plan was “March ahead along the great path of building Base Areas” (Onesto 1999a). According to this plan, platoons consisting of 25 to 35 persons were formed by uniting squads and the party made plans to escalate its armed struggle. The Fourth Plan started on 27 October 1998. Under this plan the Maoists raided police posts more frequently to seize arms and ammunition and various forms of actions including attacks on telephone towers and banks and blasting government offices in the district headquarters were carried out.

1.2. The first attack on a district headquarters

It was 25 September 2000 when hundreds of armed Maoists carried out a surprise attack on Dunai, the district headquarters of Dolpa.³ The Maoists attacked the District Police Office and the District Jail, releasing all 17 prisoners.⁴ They set some government buildings on fire, including the Chief District Officer’s office, the District Police Office, and the Land Reform Office, and looted nearly Rs 60 million from the only bank in the district, that is, a sub-branch of Nepal Bank Limited. During a five-hour-long attack, 14 policemen were killed and more than two dozen were injured. This was the first attack on the district headquarters by the Maoists. It can be guessed that this action was the first one carried out by the company level force of the people’s army.⁵ On the same evening as the attack, the general secretary of the CPN (Maoist), “Prachanda” or Pushpa Kamal Dahal, issued a

³ Dolpa is located in a remote mountain area in western Nepal, adjoining the base area of the Maoists.

⁴ Since this Dunai attack, whenever raids have been made on the district headquarters, they have released prisoners.

⁵ Although the Royal Nepalese Army camp was located in the distance of just two kilometres from the District Police Office across the Bheri river, the army didn’t come to help the police. Criticizing the army for not cooperating with the police, the then home minister Govinda Raj Joshi of the Nepali Congress party resigned from his post four days after the Dunai attack.

statement saying: “Our party is ready to hold dialogue with the government in an institutional way.”

After the Palace Massacre of 1 June 2001,⁶ the Maoists intensified their military action against the police and their political campaign in the cities, taking advantage of the chaotic situation at the centre. The main reason that caused Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala to resign from his post was the Maoists’ attack on Holeri police station in Rolpa district in July. Koirala asked King Gyanendra to deploy the Royal Nepalese Army to rescue 70 policemen who had been abducted by the Maoists during the attack on Holeri police station. However, the RNA was not deployed in the area. He later disclosed that the direct reason for his resignation was this disobedience of the army.

The newly appointed Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba declared a ceasefire with the Maoists on 23 July 2001, the day after he took up his post. Deuba was clearly shocked by the Maoists’ attack on a police post in Bajura, next door to his own home district, killing 17 policemen on the very night of his assumption of office. The Maoists took the maximum advantage of the freedom they got during this four-month-long first ceasefire period to expand and strengthen their party organization and its military front. During this time, the CPN (Maoist) held its first national convention of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in the remote village of Kureli situated in northern Rolpa, the heartland of their base area, in September 2001. The convention was inaugurated by Chairman “Prachanda”, and the battalion commander “Pasang” or Nanda Kishor Pun chaired the inaugural session.⁷ It means that a battalion-level force had already been formed at that time. At the end of the convention it was decided that the PLA would have a central headquarters and that general staff, a general political department, and a general logistic department would be set up to facilitate the central headquarters. Furthermore, Central General Staff was formed under the leadership of Chairman “Prachanda” and it was decided that “Prachanda” would be the supreme commander of the newly formed People’s Liberation Army.⁸

⁶ As might be recalled, ten members of the royal family including all the five members of King Birendra’s immediate family died in this massacre. The official investigation report ascribed the guilt for killing both the other nine and himself to the crown prince Dipendra.

⁷ CPN (Maoist) 2002.

⁸ It was publicly declared on the next day of the Ghorahi attack that “Prachanda” had become the supreme commander of the PLA.

1.3. Under the state of emergency

The first attack by the battalion level of the PLA was the one on Ghorahi, district headquarters of Dang in Rapti Zone. On the night of 23 November 2001, the Maoists one-sidedly broke the ceasefire with the government and resumed their armed actions by carrying out simultaneous attacks in various places across the country, including Ghorahi, Syangja, and Surkhet. The biggest attack was on Ghorahi.⁹ According to the statement published by “Ananta” or Barsaman Pun who was in-charge of the Western Region Military Headquarters (WRMH), around 2,000 persons including the local forces and the militias led by a battalion under the command of WRMH were involved in this Ghorahi attack. The main force led by a battalion commander “Rajesh” and a battalion political commissar “Pasang” raided the Royal Nepalese Army barracks and arms depot in Ghorahi, capturing a huge number of arms, ammunition, and explosives. (In fact, this was the first attack by the Maoists on an army barracks. Before this, they had targeted only the police force.) They also attacked the District Police Office, the District Administration Office, some other government offices, and the area police post in the nearby town of Narayanpur. During the attack 9 policemen and 14 army men were killed¹⁰ and the Maoists captured about 450 weapons, including four 2-inch mortars, three 81-mm mortars, two GPMGs (General Purpose Machine Guns), thirteen LMGs (Light Machine Guns), 93 SLRs (Self Loading Rifles), 17 pistols, and 59 .303 rifles, with nearly 125,000 bullet rounds (Ananta 2001). They also captured a large quantity of grenades and explosives. They claimed that they used a total of twenty-two vehicles including twelve army trucks to transport those captured arms, ammunition and explosive materials to their base area.¹¹ They also looted Rs 58,949,202 in cash and Rs 20 million worth of goods from the banks. The Maoists captured the town of Ghorahi for about 7 hours from 11 p.m. 23 November to 6 a.m. next morning. They abducted some

⁹ In *Maoist Information Bulletin-1* they justified breaking the ceasefire and resuming armed actions as follows: “Throughout the three rounds of talks between August 30 and November 13, that we had with the old regime, the Deuba government did not make a single political proposal to solve the problems of the country... Meanwhile, the Gyanendra clique, which effectively controls the traditional royal army and through which it had staged a royal coup d’état last June by wiping out the whole family of King Birendra, was making massive military preparations throughout the country against the revolutionary forces. The Dang barracks and military depot were the centre of a military offensive they were planning against the revolutionary base area in the Rapti Zone (i.e. the districts of Rolpa, Rukum, Salyan etc.). So it was obvious that this counterrevolutionary move under the cover of ‘peace talks’ had to be effectively pre-empted. This was what happened on November 23.”

¹⁰ The Maoists claimed that seven persons on their side died during the attack.

¹¹ CPN (Maoist) 2002.

officers including the Chief District Officer (CDO) but released them later. On the same night the Maoists carried out the simultaneous attack on the district headquarters in Syangja.¹² They raided the District Police Office, killing 14 policemen,¹³ and captured about 150 weapons. They claimed that they had looted about Rs 50 million worth of cash and gold, etc., from banks. These Ghorahi and Syangja attacks were the second and third ones on district headquarters after Dunai.

Only two days after the Ghorahi and Syangja attacks, on the night of 25 November 2001, the Maoists carried out a fourth action on Salleri, the district headquarters of Solukhumbu in the foothills of the Mt. Everest in eastern Nepal. The armed Maoists led by a platoon from their base area in western Nepal¹⁴ raided some government offices including the District Police Office and the District Administration Office in Salleri and the control tower of Phaplu airport, killing 33 persons including a CDO, a land revenue officer, four army personnel, and 27 policemen.¹⁵ They captured about 200 weapons and some Rs 50 million worth of cash and gold from banks. The day after this Salleri attack, the 26 November, the government declared the State of Emergency across the country and deployed the Royal Nepalese Army fully, for the first time, against the Maoists.¹⁶ Under the State of Emergency, which lasted for nine months, the Maoists carried out their largest attack so far in western Nepal. On the night of 16 February 2002 some two to three thousand Maoists surrounded Mangalsen, the district headquarters of Achham, and attacked the army barracks and the District Police Office using some of the sophisticated arms they had captured in the Ghorahi attack. They simultaneously raided the airport in Sanphebagar situated a few hours' walk from Mangalsen. The casualties on the government side were the biggest ever. At least 137 persons, including 57 army personnel, more than 75 policemen, including 27 stationed in Sanphebagar airport, and five civilians, including a CDO, a district intelligence officer and his wife, a post officer, and a local photographer were killed.

¹² On the same night, the Maoists also attacked a parked helicopter belonging to the Asian Airlines at the Surkhet airport and district development offices in some districts.

¹³ The Maoists claimed that there were no casualties on their side during the Syangja attack.

¹⁴ According to the testimony of a member of this platoon who participated in the Salleri attack, whom I met in Rukum in March 2003.

¹⁵ Though the government side claimed that hundreds of Maoists were killed during the attack, according to *Maoist Information Bulletin-1*, only fifteen Maoists died in this action.

¹⁶ Before the declaration of the State of Emergency, only the police force was deployed to control the insurgency.

The deployment of the Royal Nepalese Army to control the insurgency after the declaration of the State of Emergency did not stop the Maoists developing their military organization. When the security forces made an attack on the gathering of Maoists on the Lisne peak in east Rolpa both by land and from the air on 2 May 2002, the People's Liberation Army had a "temporary" brigade ("Etam" 2002). The Maoists were gathering on the Lisne peak located on the border of Rolpa and Pyuthan districts, preparing the attack on Khalanga, the district headquarters of Pyuthan.¹⁷ They were obliged to cancel the attack on Khalanga but, instead, made the deadly attack on the base camp of the security force in Gam village in north-east Rolpa on 7 May. More than 70 security personnel including an army major who was leading the united force of the army and the police were killed.¹⁸

1.4. The first action by a brigade-level force

Two weeks after the State of Emergency had lapsed, on the night of 10 September 2002, a brigade of the People's Liberation Army made an attack on Sandhikharka, the district headquarters of Arghakhanchi. The brigade commander "Pasang" specified in his statement, issued after the attack, that this well-planned action was carried out by the main force of a newly formed brigade under the Western Command. The Maoists started their assault on the army barracks, the District Police Office, and some other government offices at just 10 p.m. by firing sophisticated weapons, including 2-inch mortars and GPMGs. "Pasang" wrote in his statement that they had everything under their control after a short time and captured a lot of weapons including LMGs, SLRs, 2-inch mortars, and Rs. 40 million cash. 69 security personnel were killed and 81 persons including a CDO were abducted and released the next day. "Pasang" admitted that 59 Maoists including a company commander lost their lives during the attack ("Pasang" 2002). Maoists specially mentioned the importance of this Sandhikharka attack as the first action after they had entered the new stage of the war with centralization of their military force by forming brigade-level forces. Commander "Pasang" wrote:

Arghakhanchi is a white area under the Western Central Command. While giving influence on the white-area and expanding the red-area, we made a plan to attack Arghakhanchi with the purpose to expand the red-area gradually to the capital Kathmandu ("Pasang" 2002).

¹⁷ According to the testimony by some Maoists I met in Rolpa in 2003.

¹⁸ One of the Maoists whom I met in Rolpa admitted that there were heavy casualties on their side also.

“Prachanda” indicated the political meaning of this attack in a statement, issued three days after the attack, saying:

If the government wants the positive, peaceful and political solution, we are ready to declare the ceasefire at any time to start the procedure of talks. However, if the government continues the false propaganda for holding the election and keep on murdering the people like now, we want to make it clear that we are ready to conduct the higher military actions (“Prachanda” 2002).

On 14 November 2002, two months after the Sandhikharka attack, the Maoists again made an assault on a district headquarters. This time it was Khalanga in Jumla district of western Nepal. They raided the army barracks, the District Police Office and other government offices, killing 33 policemen, four army personnel, and a CDO. Despite the fact that the government side was pre-informed about the attack, it could not prevent it because they did not know on which date it would occur.¹⁹ The raid was carried out the day after a three-day-long *Nepāl Banda* (general strike). During the *Nepāl Banda* the security force was on high alert but they never imagined the Maoists would attack the day after a *banda* (Dhungel 2002).

1.5. After the breakdown of the second ceasefire

Two and a half months after the Jumla attack, on 29 January 2003, the government and the Maoists declared a ceasefire for the second time. The truce lasted for seven months. During the ceasefire three rounds of talks were held but the two sides could not reach agreement. “Prachanda” declared the end of the ceasefire through the Maoists’ website on 27 August 2003. After the breakdown of the second ceasefire, the Maoists adopted the strategy of decentralized actions such as personal assassinations of army and police personnel²⁰ and political activists and attacks on small police posts in the Tarai area. They attempted to raid the camp of the Armed Police Force²¹ in Kusum of Banke district on 11 October²² and the APF’s training

¹⁹ According to Dhungel (2002), security force got the information from some person who was transporting food in the eastern mountain region of Jumla.

²⁰ The morning after “Prachanda” declared the end of the ceasefire, the Maoists shot two RNA colonels separately in Kathmandu. One was killed and the other was seriously injured.

²¹ The Armed Police Force was formed in January 2001 to counter the Maoist insurgency. Maoists murdered the chief of APF Krishna Mohan Shrestha, his wife, and his bodyguard in Lalitpur on their way back from their morning walk in

centre in Bhalubang²³ of Dang district on 13 October²⁴ but both attacks failed badly.²⁵

After the failure of these two actions, the Maoists avoided major attacks and stuck to the strategy of decentralized actions. During the second ceasefire the CPN (Maoist) had stepped up its military organization. They formed a division in the west in the beginning of 2003²⁶ and then another division in the east. “Pasang” or Nanda Kishor Pun became a commander of the Western Division and “Ananta” or Barsaman Pun became a commander of the Eastern Division. Both of them are Magars from Rolpa district. Chairman “Prachanda” disclosed in his interview published in *Maoist Information Bulletin-4*, issued on 15 September 2003, that the People’s Liberation Army had formed 2 divisions, 7 brigades, and 19 battalions.²⁷ He explained the reasons for adopting the strategy of decentralized actions in the same interview, saying:

All the military strategies and tactics are based on the goals of preparing for going into strategic offensive from the present stage of strategic equilibrium. From a tactical point of view, at present the people’s army is going ahead with primary and decentralized resistance so as to feel the pulse of the enemy, tire them out and to prepare ground for the centralized offensive.

It was on the night of 2 March 2004 that the Maoists made an attack on a district headquarters after a long gap of nearly sixteen months. The target was Bhojpur, situated in the mountain region in eastern Nepal. It was

January 2003. This assassination actually forced the government to declare the ceasefire.

²² According to “Eagle”, a Maoist whom I met in Rolpa in September 2004, the Kusum attack was carried out by the “Satabariya” Second Brigade and the Bhalubang attack by the “Mangalsen” First Brigade of the PLA.

²³ Bhalubang is located 70 km east of Kusum.

²⁴ These were the first major attacks by the PLA in the Tarai area, close to the Indian border.

²⁵ It was reported that the security forces got the information about the attack on the Kusum camp from a PLA commander who had surrendered.

²⁶ When I travelled around the Maoists’ base area, Rolpa and Rukum districts, in March 2003, I heard from some local Maoists that a division had just been formed in the west but it was not yet declared.

²⁷ Soon after the Central Committee meeting of the CPN (Maoist) held in Thawang of Rolpa, “Prachanda” made it public through a statement, published on 1 September 2004, that they had formed 3 divisions, 9 brigades, and 29 battalions. The Maoists formed the new Central Division and “Pasang” became its commander.

reported in an article by Khadka and Shrestha (2004) that a force of around 1,500 persons including six companies, one from each of six battalions belonging to the Eastern Division²⁸ of the PLA, raided the telephone tower, the District Police Office and the bank, killing 20 policemen and 12 army personnel. It was the biggest ever action made by the Maoists in the Eastern Region, where they had less a strong organization. In fact, it was not a “surprise” attack, as the government side was pre-informed about a possible attack by the Maoists. According to this article, the eastern headquarters of the Royal Nepalese Army had made a public statement that they were aware that three companies of the PLA had come to the east from the west to expand their organization in eastern Nepal and that armed Maoists were gathering in the Solu area of Solukhumbu district to make an intensified attack on some district headquarters. The government side even got reports, through a surrendered Maoist and some documents found with a Maoist who had been killed by the security force one week before, that the Maoists were planning to raid a district headquarters either in Khotang or Bhojpur very soon (Paudel, Vedraj 2004). However, it appeared that the concerned security section paid little attention to it.²⁹

Just eighteen days after the Bhojpur attack, on the night of 20 March 2004, the Maoists carried out a major attack on Beni, district headquarters of Myagdi, under the command of the Western Division of the People’s Liberation Army. This ninth attack on a district headquarters was actually the largest one that the Maoists had ever made from the viewpoint of their military force and the scale of the attack. According to Magar (2004), this Beni attack was the last action under the strategy of “unification of decentralized actions”. Magar reports in the article that “Avinash”, the Third Battalion Commander of the PLA, told him that they had already completed the process of decentralized actions, dependent centralization, and unification of decentralized actions, and were preparing for “highly centralized attack”. I was able to obtain an audio tape of the mass meeting³⁰ of the Maoists held in a remote village of Gulmi district in May from Ujir Magar, a journalist for *Kāntipur* daily paper. In this mass meeting, in which the Third and the Twentieth Battalions of the PLA participated, “Avinash” explained in his address the reason why they had chosen to attack Beni, saying:

²⁸ The Eastern Division of the PLA had three brigades and nine battalions at the time of the Bhojpur attack.

²⁹ It was reported through various media that both the responsible persons of the RNA and the police in Bhojpur were mysteriously absent on that very night.

³⁰ In this mass meeting the formation of the people’s government of Gulmi district was declared and the weapons that the Maoists had looted during the Beni attack were displayed.

We, the Western Division of the PLA, made a plan to attack the battalion barracks of the Royal Nepalese Army as we have already made successes to raid its company level forces. We discussed about whether to attack the battalion barracks in our base area³¹ or the one in the Magarat Autonomous Region³² and decided to attack Beni located in the latter.

I believe that detailed research about the Maoists' largest attack so far on a district headquarters can reveal various realities about the Maoists, including their actual military capacity and their behaviour towards the public. However, as far as I know, very few reports and analyses about their military actions have been published till now. Thus, I will try to describe in detail how they carried out an attack on Beni and then note the images of Maoists that the public had, both during and after the attack, based on news reports of the local media and the testimony of some local Maoists, the public, and some army officers I met in Myagdi. For this purpose I visited Beni twice, from 25 to 28 March and from 29 April to 3 May 2004. When I visited Beni for the second time, I tried to go up to Dhorpatan near the border of Rukum district in order to trace the movements of the main force that had participated in the attack. But when we arrived in the village of Takam after a whole day's trek from Beni a local Maoist leader stopped us from proceeding, citing security reasons.³³

³¹ As noted above, since the initiation of the People's War the Maoists have considered Rolpa, Rukum, and Jajarkot districts as their base area.

³² On 9 January 2004 the CPN (Maoist) declared the region between the Bheri river in the west and the Kali Gandaki river in the east as the Magarat Autonomous Region. The districts of Rolpa, Rukum, Salyan, Pyuthan, Gulmi, Syangja, Baglung, Myagdi, Arghakhanchi, Dang (only mountain areas), Nawalparasi (only mountain areas), and Tanahun (only half part of the district) are included in it.

³³ I went to Takam with a Beni reporter of *Kāntipur* daily, Ghanshyam Khadka. "Pravin", the vice-secretary of the Myagdi-Mustang United District Committee whom we met in Takam, told us if we tried to go ahead against his advice, they would regard us as spies of the Royal Nepalese Army.



2. Before the attack

2.1. Location

Beni, the seat of district headquarters of Myagdi district in Dhaulagiri Zone, lies in Arthunge VDC. It is a bazaar with a population of about 5,000 surrounded by mountains and situated about 50 km west of Pokhara. The Myagdi river running from west to east on the south side of Beni joins the Kali Gandaki river running from north to south at the south-east end of the bazaar. Since it was connected by road to Pokhara, Beni has become known as the starting point of the trekking route to Jomsom and Dhaulagiri areas. Many foreign trekkers pass through this bazaar to go to Mustang, Dhorpatan, and Dhaulagiri areas.³⁴ The bazaar of Beni is divided into two parts by the Kali Gandaki river. The western part lies in Myagdi district and the eastern part is in Parbat district.³⁵ Most of the government offices, including the District Administration Office, the District Police Office, and the District Court, stand in a row along the Myagdi river in the western part of the bazaar.

³⁴ It so happened that no foreign trekker was staying in Beni that night.

³⁵ The district headquarters of Parbat is in Kushma, about 20 km south-east of Beni.

2.2. Signs of the attack

2.2.1. Encounter with a group of armed Maoists

According to Ghanshyam Khadka, a reporter for *Kāntipur* daily based in Beni, a team of thirty to forty persons of the CPN (United Marxist-Leninist) led by some local leaders had launched a political campaign to go around various villages of Myagdi district in the middle of February 2004. When they were in Shikh VDC in eastern Myagdi, they noticed some 100 to 150 armed Maoists were staying in the same village and moving westwards. (This relatively small force of Maoists may be presumed to have belonged to the Fourth Brigade of the Western Division from Gandaki area which had come to participate in the attack.) But they did not make contact with each other and the Maoists did not intervene in their programme at that time. It was on 29 February when the UML team reached Chimkhola VDC that the Maoists blocked them, forbidding them to conduct their programme inside the Vishesh Kshetra (*viśeṣ kṣetra*, Special Region).³⁶ The UML team was obliged to go back to Beni from Chimkhola and decided to hold their last programme in Pulachaur VDC, a village close to Beni. When Ghanshyam went to Pulachaur on 3 March to cover the UML programme, some villagers told him that the Maoists had just held a military training on the top of the hill in the village.

2.2.2. Blockade

Ghanshyam heard from an NGO staff member working in Ramche VDC that the Maoists had called the local villagers together on 28 February and directed them not to go to Beni for an indefinite period. He also received reports from the villagers in north Myagdi that the Maoists were directing the villagers through megaphones not to go to Beni after 6 March and to finish their work in the district headquarters before that. They added, “If you meet any kind of accident in Beni because you did not listen to us, it is your responsibility.” Furthermore, Ghanshyam saw a poster in a local hotel in Singa VDC on 3 March, on which the same notice was written. Ghanshyam had never heard of this kind of thing happening in his district. He guessed that either the Maoists were going to attack Beni or some high-ranking

³⁶ According to “Pravin”, the Vishesh Kshetra was formed in April 2002. Eleven districts are included in the Vishesh Kshetra. They are Rolpa, Rukum, Salyan, Dang, Pyuthan, the Vishesh Jilla (*viśeṣ jillā*, Special District), Myagdi-Mustang, Arghakhanchi, Gulmi, Baglung, Kapilbastu. Among them, the Vishesh Jilla and Myagdi-Mustang were the original districts formed by the Maoist. The CPN (Maoist) formed the Vishesh Jilla by putting together thirteen Kham Magar villages in north Rolpa and east Rukum but decided to dissolve it in a central committee meeting held in August 2004. The areas of the Vishesh Kshetra and the Magarat Autonomous Region are virtually identical.

Maoist leaders might be moving in the area or they had a plan to disturb the “people’s welcome” or “felicitation” for the royal couple which was to be held on 28 March in Pokhara.

Around the same time, the same kinds of activities were seen in Rukum and Baglung, the neighbouring districts of Myagdi. A local journalist of *Kāntipur* reported from Rukum on 29 February³⁷ that the Maoists there were strictly prohibiting the residents in the district from moving from one place to another, except for giving permission to students who had to take their SLC examinations in the district headquarters. A villager told this journalist that the Maoists were threatening the people, telling them that if they secretly moved about without their permission, they would be sent to a labour camp. The same journalist reported in the same issue of *Kāntipur* that the Maoists were using school compounds for their military training in the course of four-month-long “people’s military campaign” in the remote villages of Rukum. In Pipal VDC a secondary school had to close its classes for two days a week earlier because the Maoists had captured the school and were holding training there. A local daily paper, *Dhorpātan*, published from Baglung, reported in its 2 March issue that the Maoist in-charge of no. 4 Baglung issued a statement declaring that they would start to blockade the district headquarters from 3 March for an indefinite period and the traffic of people and goods to the district headquarters would be prohibited from 8 March, according to the blockade programme in Rapti, Lumbini, and Dhaulagiri Zones. The Maoists also disclosed that they had declared this blockade programme in order to carry out an armed action.

The Maoists set up two posts to check the traffic of villagers to Beni after 6 March, one in Vaviyachaur VDC, located at three hours’ distance on foot from Beni, and another in Darwang VDC, located five hours from Beni. Both of the check-posts were situated on the way to Dhorpatan area in western Myagdi. They did not set up any post on the north side, that is, on the trekking route to Jomsom.³⁸ Due to this blockade, the traffic of people to Beni noticeably decreased after 6 March but the Maoists allowed foreign trekkers to come and go to Beni.

According to shopkeepers in Darwang bazaar, the Maoists did not stop people from coming to Darwang but they did not let them go to Beni. After 14 March they even became stricter and started to prohibit the villagers from going to neighbouring villages. In the meantime, some students in 10th class started to come to Beni, escaping from their villages secretly during the night, to take their examinations for SLC (School Leaving Certificate) that was supposed to start on 24 March in the district headquarters.

³⁷ From 1 March 2004 issue of *Kāntipur*.

³⁸ Clearly, they were more careful about the route that they were planning to take when attacking Beni.

A local in Darwang said that, during the blockade, groups of Maoists frequently came to Darwang bazaar to buy foodstuff. He said that Darwang bazaar had been like a “supply centre” for the Maoists for three years. Maoists from Rukum, Baglung, and Rolpa used to come there to purchase food and other daily materials. They even kept their own horses there for transportation. (The Maoists held a mass meeting to declare the formation of the second people’s government of Myagdi-Mustang district in Darwang in January 2004.)

2.2.3. Warnings

Many people I met in Beni said that they had heard a rumour that in the villages the Maoists were suggesting to the guardians of children attending boarding schools in Beni that they should take their children back as Beni might be insecure. Some parents did indeed fetch their children from Beni. According to a teacher in Lokdeep Secondary Boarding School, parents of some fifteen boarding students from nearby villages came to take their children back home at the beginning of March but all the students returned before examinations started on 20 March.

2.2.4. Abduction

On the night of 8 March, the Maoists abducted sixteen villagers including two local schoolteachers and three women from Chimkhola VDC.³⁹ All were Magars. Among them an old man over sixty was allowed to go back the next day. But the others, aged from seventeen to forty, were told that they had been taken to work for a “big programme” and would not be allowed to go back until this programme was over. They were taken to Machchhim in Muna VDC after two days’ walk and divided into several groups. Most of them were taken to Takam VDC, situated in western part of Myagdi district, and stayed there until 19 March, just one day before the Beni attack. They said that they had seen thousands of armed Maoists gathering in Takam on around 18 March. One of the abducted said that they had to cook *dāl bhāt* and beef curry for the *lāl senā* (red army). In the same way, twenty-six youths were abducted on 15 March in neighbouring Baglung district.⁴⁰ Among them 23 were taken from Bungadobhan VDC close to Dhorpatan area. Most of the abducted were Dalits (low caste people). In fact, these people were abducted to work as “volunteers” during the action. One of their main tasks was to carry the injured Maoists.⁴¹

³⁹ I was able to interview some of them, including two teachers in Beni.

⁴⁰ According to an article published in the 20 March 2004 issue of *Kāntipur*.

⁴¹ One of the abductees I met in Beni said that the majority of “volunteers” were either Magars or Dalits.

2.3. Preparation

2.3.1. Special People's Military Campaign

According to “Pravin”⁴², the vice-secretary of the Myagdi-Mustang United District Committee of the CPN (Maoist), his committee started to prepare for the military action around 20 February, just one month before the Beni attack, following the decision of the Western Command and the Western Division of the People's Liberation Army. “Pravin” and his comrades were put in charge of arranging food and lodging for thousands of guerrillas who would come to Myagdi district from outside. Prior to this, the CPN (Maoist) had launched the Vishesh Jana Sainya Abhiyan (*viśeṣ jana sainya abhiyān*, Special People's Military Campaign).⁴³ “Pravin” explained the relationship between this campaign and the attack:

We started the Vishesh Jana Sainya Abhiyan from Gulmi district on 3 February. The main purpose of this campaign, which will last for four months till 2 June, is to strengthen our military power and to end state power. The achievement of the armed rebellion by the general public (*ām saśāstra vidrohī*) that is, creating a situation in which the general public rises up by itself with arms in their hands, is the aim of this campaign. We carried out the Beni attack as a part of this campaign.

2.3.2. Reporters

For the first time the People's Liberation Army invited some journalists close to the Maoists to report on the spot on the Beni attack (Dhital 2004b). According to “Sandhya” (2004), eastern Nepal correspondent of the Maoists' website magazine *Janādeś*, four reporters participated in the attack. They were Manrishi Dhital, western Nepal correspondent of *Janādeś*, “Sandesh”, a correspondent of Radio Janaganatantra (Radio People's Republic), “Chetan”, a war correspondent of the Western Division, and “Sandhya” herself. Dhital wrote in his article:

⁴² I had an interview with him on 1 May 2004 in Takam VDC. He is a 41-year-old ex-teacher.

⁴³ According to Jwala (2004), Maoists are operating this campaign in their most affected area, that is, the Rapti Special Region and the Bheri-Karnali Region in western Nepal. Jwala quoted the Maoists as saying: “At the time when the Royal Nepalese Army has been completely Americanized and the propaganda claiming that the Maoist army has already become weak is being propagated, the Maoists have started this campaign in order to destroy this situation. In this campaign they are forcing one person under 60 years old from every household to take up weapons and join the Maoist army.”

In the beginning of March 2004, I received an invitation to go and collect news about a long campaign. When we arrived in the western base area following an invitation, we saw all kinds of nationalities of Nepal including Tibetans from the Himal, Madhises and Tharus from the Tarai, Dotyals⁴⁴ and Khas from the Seti-Mahakali and Karnali-Bheri regions, Magars from the Rapti-Dhaulagiri region, Gurungs from the Gandak region, Rais, neglected and suppressed Dalits and Newars. A lot of women of all the nationalities, wearing combat dress and carrying weapons, were also participating.

While we were in the base area, helicopters flew over Thawang and Mahat⁴⁵ and there was an air raid in Mahat. As we participated in a three-week-long march of the People's Liberation Army from the base area, we arrived in Beni, the district headquarters of Myagdi, on 20 March (Dhital 2004b).

“Sandhya” wrote about the preparation and the sending off programme held in some place in the Vishesh Jilla (Special District):

I have just visited the Vishesh Jilla under the Western Command. In this very instance, Pasang, Commander of the People's Liberation Army's Western Division, is making the final preparations, giving instructions to his army about the action, and arranging the military formation in order to complete the responsibility given by the history... Thanks to the garlands of red *lālī gurās* (rhododendron) and the *abīr* (red powder) presented from the people of the Vishesh Jilla, the cheeks of Commander Pasang, of Com. Viplav who has the responsibility of being political commissar, of all the People's Army personnel, of all the cultural activists and of all the journalists participating looked beautiful... After the welcome programme ended, Division Commander Pasang read out a letter of congratulations sent by Supreme Commander Comrade Prachanda. After that a message of congratulations sent by the in-charge of the Western Command “Diwakar” was read out and then Com. Pasang and Com. Viplav expressed their own views... From that day an enormous people's military march started as well (“Sandhya” 2004).

“Etam” described the start of the march:

⁴⁴ People from Doti.

⁴⁵ Thawang is a village located in north-eastern Rolpa. Mahat, a village near Thawang, belongs to Rukum district. Both villages were included in the Maoists' Vishesh Jilla (Special District).

“Division! Attention! Division, stand at ease! The First Brigade will head out first. The People’s Liberation Army will march ahead starting with the First Brigade. Second, Third, and Fourth Brigades will follow.” After Division Commander Pasang gave the last order, the Western Division of the PLA started its march from the courtyard of the secondary school in Lukum.⁴⁶

“Chetan”, the war correspondent of the Western Division, filmed their journey using a video camera (Dhital 2004b). The Royal Nepalese Army came across a copy of the tape in a bag found near Beni after the attack. One of the RNA officers who saw the tape said:

There were scenes of a big mass gathering in a large ground. The camera caught the whole mass. Leaders were shown being given garlands and Pasang addressed the mass. There were scenes of sending off. After two days, it seemed that they passed through a mountain road covered with snow. The camera filmed horses and around 500 “volunteers” in plain clothes. Most of them looked like Magars. Somebody said to the camera, “We have arrived in the bosom of Dhaulagiri.” The video tape ends with a scene of a snowy path.

The main force of the PLA entered Myagdi district by way of Dhorpatan area in Baglung district. “Sandhya” wrote about their trip to Beni in her article:

After climbing for three and a half hours, we arrived at the top of the mountain. We measured the temperature and altitude there. The temperature was 15 degrees and the altitude was 3,738 m above sea level. It was raining on the peak. There were signs of snowfall. I felt very cold. It was probably the highest I had ever climbed in my life. I also felt very bad that I couldn’t walk... As we marched, the commanders were giving commands to their teams using telephone sets... We travelled night and day. Though we felt sleepy and tired, we were able to cope with it and, after passing Baglung district, we arrived at the Jaljala Mountain in Myagdi district. We measured the altitude there. It was 3,379 m above sea level. While playing *lukāmārī* (hide and seek) in the snow, everyone was thinking about the forthcoming action (“Sandhya” 2004).

⁴⁶ “Etam” (2004). Lukum is a village situated in south-eastern Rukum district.

2.3.3. Assembling and dispatch

According to “Pravin”, about 6,000 persons participated in the Beni attack, consisting of 3,800 armed Maoists of the PLA and 2,200 “volunteers” including non-armed Maoists and villagers who had been abducted by force to help them. All the four brigades of the Western Division, the “Mangalsen” First Brigade from the Vishesh Kshetra (Special Region), the “Satabaliya” Second Brigade from the Bheri-Karnali region, the “Lisne” Third Brigade from the Seti-Mahakali region, and the “Basu-Smriti” Fourth Brigade from the Gandaki region, participated in the action. On the other hand, the Third Battalion Commander “Avinash”⁴⁷ said that 3,600 persons of not all the battalions and only some from each of the four brigades and 6,000 “volunteers” had participated in the Beni attack.

“Pravin” said that all the forces began to assemble in and around Takam VDC in Myagdi district on 17 March. Geographical, political, and military trainings were given to the participants there. Local villagers in Takam testified that a huge number of Maoists came from the direction of Jaljala in two groups, one in the evening of 18 March and another in the morning of the next day. They stayed in various villages around Takam and set up mess in many places including the main villages of Takam, Siwang, Kaphaldanda, Machchhim, Muna, Phalaigaun, and Lamsung. The Maoists mobilized the villagers to prepare food for them. One of the women in Takam who helped to cook for the Maoists said that they had cooked around 700 kg rice on the night of 18 March. Some villagers in Takam told that the Maoists had bought several cows to eat in the village, at a price of Rs 4,000 to 4,500 per head. They even brought their own butchers. The Maoists tried to take some villagers as “volunteers” to Beni but the people in Takam opposed in union, saying that they would not let anybody go from this village to Beni but they would do whatever they could do in the village. As the area in-charge of the Maoists had accepted their demand, nobody from Takam participated in the attack as volunteers.

According to “Pravin”, they changed the original plan while staying in Takam. He explained the reason:

Our original plan was to raid Beni on the night of 22 March but we advanced the date of the attack by two days because we had a report from Beni that the information about the attack might have been leaked out. In fact, we intercepted the conversation of the security force in Beni, indicating the possibility of leaking at 11 p.m. on 18 March. Immediately after we got a report, we decided to advance the date and to carry out the action on the night of 20 March.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ From his speech to the mass meeting held in Gulmi in May 2004.

⁴⁸ Some Maoists whom I met in Rolpa in September 2004 confirmed this.

The main force left Takam area for Beni on 19 March. "Pravin" said that they had divided the force into seven groups as follows: 1) A battalion to block the security force in Kushma, district headquarters of Parbat. 2) A battalion to block the security force in Baglung, district headquarters of Baglung. 3) A battalion with 300 personnel to block the security forces stationed in the Ghumaunetal camp, situated 3 km north of Beni. 4) A platoon with 60 to 70 personnel to block a possible encounter with the RNA patrolling team from the Ghumaunetal camp. 5) The Fourth Brigade to go to Pari Beni (*Pāri Benī*), that is, the eastern side of the Kali Gandaki river. 6) A battalion with 300 personnel to raid the district jail located on the opposite side of the Kali Gandaki river. 7) The main force with Division Commander "Pasang" to attack Beni. The biggest force (7) took the main route to Beni, that is, via Darwang-Vaviyachaur-Singa-Arthunge. From near Tatopani in Singa VDC one group went up to the Arthunge hills and another went straight to Beni along the Myagdi river. "Etam" wrote that the Third Brigade went ahead by the motor road along the river and the other three brigades took the mountain road ("Etam" 2004).

The main force left Takam towards Darwang in the afternoon of 19 March. A villager in Takam expressed how they looked when they left:

When they went to Beni, there were an uncountable number of people just like "hairs". They were marching in a line. I saw some people hunting fleas from their own bodies. They seemed not to have taken a bath for long time. There were some old people walking with sticks. Among the armed Maoists, around 20 to 25 % were women.

Darwang bazaar is located three hours' walking distance from Takam. It is a small bazaar with about 100 households whose inhabitants are Magars, Kshetris, Bahuns, Thakalis, and Dalits. Since 16 March the Maoists had strictly forbidden the people of this area to move from one village to another. It was on the evening of 19 March that the first group of Maoists came to Darwang. A local teacher in Darwang testified:

The Maoists came here in two groups. The first group came on the evening of 19 March. They just passed through and did not stay. I heard that this group spent the night in Ratodhunga of Vaviyachaur VDC. But the second group that arrived in Darwang in the early morning of 20 March stayed here to take a meal. They left Darwang around 11 to 12 a.m. Some Maoists said that they would raid Beni at 10 p.m. that night.

Around 1 to 2 p.m. on 20 March a shopkeeper in Darwang bazaar saw some Maoists running towards Beni in a hurry carrying bombs. They

seemed to have received instructions to come quickly. A local woman who owns a lodge in Darwang bazaar said:

When they left here for Beni, local Maoists ordered all the households here to prepare meals for them next morning. They said: “As we will come back here again at 5 a.m. next morning, you have to prepare meals in time.” But, in fact, they came back here only in the afternoon next day.

“Pravin”’s testimony supports this:

Our original plan was to end the raid early in the morning and to withdraw when it got a little lighter. However, the battle lasted longer than we expected.

All thirteen people⁴⁹ who had been abducted from Chimkhola VDC on 8 March were with the first group of the main force. They left Takam in the evening of 19 March and passed through Darwang to arrive in Ralawang of Vaviyachaur VDC at night. They stayed in the houses of Ralawang until noon the next day and were sent to Thaiwang in Kuhun VDC to take bamboo-stretchers which had been made there around 1 or 2 p.m. These stretchers were used for carrying the wounded. They transported the stretchers to Simalchaur in Vaviyachaur VDC and then went to the Arthunge hills to wait there at 1 a.m. on 21 March.

The main force almost encountered a patrolling team of the Royal Nepalese Army near Beni.⁵⁰ “Pravin” said:

When we were in Ralawang, we came to know that a group of the security forces had come to Simalchaur, only an hour’s walking distance from Ralawang. We thought we might have to fight them; however, it did not happen as they did not advance from there but went to Beni. They did not even notice that we were there.

Janādeś reporter Manrishi Dhital also wrote about this:

⁴⁹ Among the abducted sixteen, one old man was allowed to return the next day and other two may have escaped.

⁵⁰ “Pravin” claimed they were from the camp in Pokhara. On the night of the attack, some 120 soldiers of the RNA from Pokhara were staying in the hall of the District Development Office.

At midnight on 20 March, we got a report that the *Śāhī Senā* (Royal Army) had come out of Beni. The People's Liberation Army was at a distance of four hours' walk from Beni. The commander of the people's army directed hundreds of guerrillas to be ready, saying: "If they come, we will fight here", but the royal army returned to Beni after reaching a place just half an hour away. When the sun was setting, dozens of warriors of the people's army put their own identity cards in their pockets, put bullets in their guns and we also put adequate energy in our pens, a cassette tape in a taperecorder and a film in a camera, while thinking about the coming war... Now, there were two ID cards in our pockets. One was signed by Dharanidhar Khatiwada, General Director of the Department of Information belonging to the old power⁵¹ and the other signed by Santosh Budha Magar, President of the new Magarat Autonomous Regional People's Government. The two ID cards have the same names and the same organization. Only the logos of the two powers and the colours of the cards were different (Dhital 2004b).

3. The attack on Beni – the longest battle

3.1. Opening an attack

3.1.1. The Arthunge hills

Beni bazaar lies in a small valley surrounded by the Arthunge hills on the north-western side and the Jyamrukot hills to the south. The main attacking force took a route via the Arthunge hills to enter Beni. One of their main targets, the barracks of the Shri Kali Prasad Battalion of the Royal Nepalese Army, lies at the western end of Beni. Some force of the People's Liberation Army came via the main road along the Myagdi river from Vaviyachaur and made an attack on the barracks from the side of Mangalaghat bazaar, located in the west of Beni. The Arthunge hills stand just behind the RNA barracks.

A shopkeeper in the Arthunge hills who lives along the way to Beni said:

I returned home at 7.30 p.m. on 20 March after attending the funeral of a villager who had committed suicide earlier that day. I took my wife with me to that house again and returned to my home at 9.15 p.m.. Immediately after that, around 9.30, I saw the Maoists running towards Beni. I heard the first gun report at 11.05 p.m.

⁵¹ The Maoists call the government the "old power" and themselves the "new power".

Western Division Commander “Pasang” and his main attacking force took the route via the Arthunge hills to enter Beni. The article by Manrishi Dhital confirms it:

After ascending for three hours in utter darkness [it was a new moon night], we came to know that the attack would start at 11 o'clock at night. It was already 10.30 p.m... Due to the darkness we could not find out the place given for reporting. After some time the Myagdi district headquarters, Beni, was seen in a dim light. While Sandhya and I were delayed, Chetan Kunwar walked down a hill. Then there were three of us. Five minutes before 11 o'clock we took our tape-recorders from the bags. While giving some symbolic directions through his own communication set, Division Commander Pasang with his own team also went down the hill. He was speaking to somebody: “Our troops have already reached much closer to the barracks. Now, the first firing is about to start. Please stand by. The town has already been surrounded by our troops” (Dhital 2004a; cf. also “Sandhya” 2004).

Dhital writes about the beginning of the attack as follows:

We were forcing our eyes to concentrate on our watches. It was 10.58 p.m. All of a sudden, the sound of firing was heard in Beni's main bazaar. The situation was becoming more intense. From just 11.00 p.m., the 81 mm's troop of Agni, our senior and experienced member, kept on firing bombs continuously for fifteen minutes, from a distance of at least 2,000 m. In the form of counter-attack, bombs started to come to all the hills surrounding the Royal Army's barracks. Within five minutes, a fire broke out in the hills to the eastern side of Beni. 51 minutes after it had started, Division Commander Pasang gave directions to the bombing troops to stop and directed all the troops that had entered the district headquarters to go ahead and cut the barbed wire (ibid.).

The Maoists fired 81-mm and 2-inch mortars from at least three points, two places on the way to the Arthunge hills and at one place on the hill to the south of Mangalaghat. I saw one of the spots in Arthunge village. It was at a height of over five hundred metres above the army barracks. They set up one 81-mm mortar and two 2-inch mortars at the same place. More than fifty empty cartridges for the 81-mm mortar's bullets were lying on the ground. “Etam” had mentioned in his article that about 45 81-mm mortar shells had fired within 15 minutes of the beginning of the battle (“Etam” 2004).

3.1.2. The Shri Kali Prasad Battalion (Engineering)

The Shri Kali Prasad Battalion (E) of the Royal Nepalese Army led by a lieutenant colonel had been stationed in Beni since 32 months before the raid. Before that only a platoon of the RNA used to stay in Beni. The battalion were stationed there to construct the road from Beni to Mustang. I don't know how many army personnel were staying in the barracks on the very night as the army officers I met did not give the information, however, it can be guessed that some several hundred soldiers were there when the Maoists attacked on the night of 20 March. Some soldiers were stationed in the Ghumaunetal camp, located 3 km north of Beni on the way to Jomsom. About twenty army personnel were stationed on a post on the roof of a building of the District Development Committee (DDC) Chairman's quarter and other twenty on a post on the roof of the District Police Office main building. By chance, about 120 personnel of the RNA from the Pokhara camp had just arrived in Beni and were staying in a DDC conference hall located behind the buildings of the DDC and the District Administration Office that night. "Pravin" admitted that they had been ignorant of the force from Pokhara staying inside the DDC compound although they did know about the forces stationed on top of the DDC Chairman's quarters.

The lieutenant colonel of the RNA who led the fighting with the Maoists testified:

Some time after 10.30 p.m., all of a sudden, support firing by 81-mm mortars, 2-inch mortars, GPMGs (General Purpose Machine Guns), and LMGs (Light Machine Guns) began from the upper side and from the far distance. Right after that firing started from close quarters, from the east and the west. 25 shells of 81-mm mortar and about 300 shells of 2-inch mortars were found inside our compound.

The lieutenant colonel claimed that they had no information about the attack,⁵² saying:

When we carried out the operation against the Maoists called *Baḍhārkūḍhār* (Sweeping Operation) across Myagdi district about two weeks before the attack, we found few Maoists in the district. We didn't have any information about the attack. The first bullet was the first information for us.

⁵² "Pravin" claimed that the RNA in Beni got the information of the Maoists attacking Beni and the additional force came from Pokhara on the basis of this information.

3.1.3. Beni bazaar

Most of the government offices in Beni were built in a line at the south of the bazaar along the Myagdi river. The District Police Office stands at the eastern end and the District Development Committee's buildings at the western end. Between them, the Telecommunication Office, the Assistant Chief District Officer's quarters, the DDC chairman's guest house, the Karmachari Milan Kendra (Officers' Meeting Centre), the CDO's quarters, the District Court, and the District Administration Office stand in a line from east to west. The barracks of the Shri Kali Prasad Battalion are situated at a distance of about 300 m to the west of the DDC office. It is clear that the location of these government offices made it easier for the Maoists to attack as they could concentrate their forces in the limited area. The Maoists utilized tall private houses in front of government offices for their attack. As soon as they started their action, they entered these houses and fired at the security forces from the roof or from inside the rooms.

A 66-year-old shopkeeper whose house is located just in front of the District Court started to hear gun reports just at 11 o'clock on the night of 20 March. In the beginning he thought the RNA might be practising as had happened before. But when he looked outside, he saw the Maoists coming from the east and entering the compound of the District Court. After a while, he heard the gun reports of GPMGs and LMGs from the rooftops of neighbouring houses. This shopkeeper, who had served in the Indian Army as a soldier until 1995, could recognize the different sorts of guns from their reports.

A 37-year-old man, whose home and restaurant-hotel stands in front of the DDC chairman's guesthouse, did not open the door when the Maoists banged loudly on the shutters. There were eleven guests staying in the hotel that night. The Maoists broke the lock and entered around 11.30 p.m. He saw seven Maoists including two females. They asked him to give them the room keys of the VDC offices⁵³ on the second floor. When he said that he did not have them, a Maoist with a Mongoloid face in his early twenties got angry and threatened him. They broke into one of the VDC offices and started to shoot from there. They stayed in the room until 9.30 the next morning and kept on firing for ten hours.

The Beni reporter of *Kāntipur* daily newspaper Ghanshyam Khadka was invited to dinner that night by a friend who owns a hotel in Bank Road, situated about 200 metres north of the District Police Office. As there was an undeclared curfew in the town after eight at night, he decided not to go back home and stayed in his friend's hotel. He had already gone to bed when

⁵³ Muna and Ramche VDC offices were in his building since December 2003 for security reasons. In fact, most of the VDC offices in Myagdi had moved to the district headquarters as their buildings in the villages have been destroyed by the Maoists.

he heard the sound of firing in the distance around 10.30 p.m. He also thought that the army might be firing as they sometimes did at night. However, he started to hear the sounds of fire being returned and explosions at eleven. At 11.15 p.m. eight to ten Maoists came into the building where he was staying and went to the rooftop. As he had heard that the Maoists sometimes used local people as human shields during an attack, he put off the light and hid. The Maoists left the building after firing from the roof for nearly an hour.

Two retired ex-soldiers, one who had worked for the Indian Army for 24 years and another for 17 years, lived in a house just behind the hotel compound where Ghanshyam was staying that night. They were brave enough to go out of their rooms to observe what was happening. They said:

It was five minutes after eleven when we heard gun reports. Ten minutes after that, some thirteen to fourteen Maoists in combat dress, including two women, entered our house by opening the windows of back rooms and passing through the house to the lane. We saw some of them carrying SLRs (Self Loading Rifles) and INSAS (Infantry Small Arms System) rifles. Though all their faces were camouflaged with black powder, many of them looked like Mongoloids. Many of them were speaking some language of western Nepal.

The compound of the District Agriculture Development (DAD) office is situated just in front of the District Police Office (DPO). The Maoists made this building one of the main firing points on the DPO. That night only one guard was inside the compound. The guard described how they entered:

I was sleeping in the guard room on the first floor of the office building. I don't know the time as I didn't have a watch, but at first I heard gun reports from the bazaar side. Immediately after that they came into the compound from the river side [the Kali Gandaki river is just behind the compound]. There were some 500 to 600 Maoists around here. They asked me to give the key of the DAD officer's room on the first floor and I gave it. I was helpless on my own and could not refuse.

The DAD officer's room faces the DPO building. There is no obstruction between them. Obviously, the Maoists used this room as the main spot to fire on the DPO building before they went into the DPO compound.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ A DAO officer said there were about 500 empty cartridges left in his office room.

3.1.4. Mangalaghat bazaar

The barracks of the Shri Kali Prasad Battalion are located between Beni bazaar and Mangalaghat bazaar. On its western side, Mangalaghat bazaar, smaller than Beni, lies along the Myagdi river. It seemed that the first battle between the Maoists and a small patrolling group of the security force occurred in a small lane between the barracks and Mangalaghat bazaar. Six persons, four from the security forces and two from the Maoists,⁵⁵ died on the spot.

According to some local people in this bazaar, a part of the main force of the Maoists that came along the Myagdi river reached there around 10.45 p.m. They forced the local people in the bazaar to open their shops and took whatever drink and food they wanted and then started to fight. Interestingly, there are many ex-Gurkha soldiers in this bazaar who had served in the Indian Army. One of them, a 60-year-old man who was in the Indian Army for eighteen years, reported:

At first I heard gun reports in the distance and then a huge number of people, at least 1,500, came into the bazaar from all sides. There were people from the age of fourteen-fifteen to about fifty years old but most of them were boys and girls either teenagers or in their early twenties. I saw some Maoists carrying AK-47 rifles on their shoulders. Many of them had grenades. From the sounds I could tell that heavy exchanges of fire were taking place.

The Maoists brought out many sacks of food grain and tables from several shops in the bazaar to use as barricades in the front line.

3.1.5. The District Jail

The Myagdi District Jail is situated on the opposite side of the Myagdi river. According to "Pravin", a battalion of 300 personnel that came from the Bhakunde hills made a raid on the District Jail. Normally, twenty-one policemen were stationed in the District Jail but two of them were on leave, so only nineteen policemen were there on the night of 20 March. According to an article published in *Kāntipur* on 31 March, one of the policemen on duty that night said that, when no security forces came to aid them, they escaped to save their own lives and hid behind rocks on the river bank. However, the testimony of one of the prisoners whom I met in Beni was different. He had returned to Beni after being freed by the Maoists during the raid:

⁵⁵ Six bodies were found in one place, in the hall of a house under construction near the spot.

Around 150 Maoists entered the jail at 11.30 p.m. The policemen had already run away from the jail. The Maoists told us to come out as they were going to blast the buildings and we, 33 prisoners in all, ran away. They accompanied us up to the road and said: “If you go down [to Beni bazaar], you will be caught in a battle. So you had better go up [to the village].” We all went to the village but I and the other three returned here later.

Manrishi Dhital’s article (2004b) confirms his account:

Troops led by Commander Akarshan reached the jail and sent a report at 12 midnight: “We captured the jail. There was no resistance at all. There is only one *havaldār* [a police rank] here. He had only one rifle. There are 35 prisoners.⁵⁶ What to do with them?” Commander Pasang ordered: “Please free all the prisoners. Free the *havaldār* as well. Please you come to this side to join us. Where have the other policemen gone?” Akarshan answered: “They seem to have run away. Now we will follow your orders.” After that we saw the jail on fire.

When I went to the District Jail in Beni on 26 March, I saw that the Shiva-linga in the small temple to the right of the entrance gate had been destroyed. A local journalist told me that the temple had been built by the prisoners. It was clear that the Maoists had destroyed it.

3.1.6. War clinics

The Maoists set up treatment centres for the wounded in at least five places in Beni and some more in Mangalaghat. An area in-charge of the Maoists, named “Ramesh Vidrohi” whom I met in Darwang VDC participated in the Beni attack as a “volunteer”. It was his first experience of military action. He was in a local volunteers group whose responsibility was to carry the injured persons during the attack. He said:

I was in charge of three treatment centres. We set up three kinds of treatment centre. The primary treatment centres just to stop bleeding were set up near the front line and the second one a little behind the primary centres and then the third ones, where most of the surgery, such as taking out bullets, was conducted, were set up a little distant from the front line. The wounded started to be brought around 1 a.m. on 21 March.

⁵⁶ As noted above, the real number of prisoners was 33.

The Maoists turned the house of a local Newar into one of the main treatment centres. It stands on the northern side of Birendra Chok, just 80 metres from the compound of the DDC and the DAO. A house owner described what happened:

I and my wife were sleeping in a room in the first floor. After hearing gun reports and some noise outside, we went down to a room on the ground floor where our three daughters were sleeping. Immediately after that, fifty to sixty Maoists in combat dress came into our house both from the garden side and from the shop side. At first we thought they might be the security forces but, in fact, they were Maoists. They knocked on the door of the room where we were staying but we didn't open it. When I looked out the window, I saw they were breaking a lock to enter the room next to ours. After they left, we realized that they had used three rooms in our house, one on the ground floor and two on the first floor, as their treatment centre. We, the five of us, stayed inside the room and didn't go out for the whole night until they had left.

Though his family had no conversation with the Maoists, a tailor's family living in a small rented house several hundred metres north of this Newar's had a different experience. The Maoists used the tailor's house not only as a treatment centre but also to store their ammunition. It was also around 11 p.m. when the Maoists came into their house. His wife explained how they came in and how they behaved:

I and my two small children were quietly staying in the first floor with the light off. When I opened a window facing the garden, I saw many people coming down from the hill behind our house. Most of them were dressed like army men and their faces were painted black. They brought bullets into our courtyard and came to fetch them during the fight. As they made the ground floor a treatment centre, we could not go out to the toilet for the whole night. When they came into our house, a guerrilla asked my younger brother who was sleeping alone on the ground floor, "Where is the army firing from?" When he answered that he didn't know, this Maoist kicked my brother with his booted foot. He even slapped my six-year-old daughter when she said "Don't hit my uncle".

The Maoists set up another treatment centre in a vacant house under construction owned by the Thakali Samaj (Thakali Society), situated 200 metres north-east of the District Police Office, and in a quarter of the District Agriculture Development Officer inside the DAD office compound.

They also made other medical centres on the lane in New Road, about a hundred meters north of the tailor's rented house, and at a house in Ganesh Tol about four hundred metres north of the DPO. In Mangalaghat bazaar as well, the Maoists set up at least two main treatment centres immediately after the battle had started. A shopkeeper, whose kitchen they used as a treatment centre, said:

Within five or ten minutes after the firing started at 11 p.m. all my family, except my aged mother who was alone upstairs, gathered in one place. While we were discussing about which room would be safe to stay in, some Maoists opened the shutter of my shop on the ground floor and came in. Then, a woman Maoist with a red band around her head and wearing trousers and a shirt, who had a Kshetri-like face and looked about 20 years old, came upstairs and asked me for water and some bedclothes. She said that they had some injured persons and added politely, "We don't do anything to you. So please stay safely." I came to know later that the first exchange of fire had already occurred between the Maoists and a patrol of the security forces near Mangalaghat bazaar at that time and they had brought some wounded.

The Maoists also used the class rooms of Lokdeep Secondary Boarding School that stood behind Mangalaghat bazaar. On that night nearly fifty students and six teachers were staying in the school building. All the students and four teachers were in the second floor and two teachers were in the first floor. The Maoists used the rooms in the ground floor. They also set up an emergency clinic close to the front line in an open space behind a house at the eastern end of the bazaar.

3.2. In the battle

3.2.1. Communication

It was about two and a half hours after the Maoists had started the action, that is, around 1.30 a.m. of 21 March, when all the 515 telephone lines in Beni were suddenly cut off.⁵⁷ After many bullets had hit the telephone exchange station, telecommunication was interrupted. There was no one in the station. But the Maoists claimed they had not cut off the telephone lines intentionally. "Pravin" said:

There was no plan to destroy the telephone exchange station. Rather, we had a plan to make contacts with the outside through telephone lines and to capture the materials in the exchange station.

⁵⁷ Some of them were lines of Galeshwar, situated 3 km north of Beni.

From the facts that the Western Division of the PLA, for the first time, invited some journalists to report about their battle and that they even tried to record their fight with a video camera, it is clear that the Maoists intended to use the Beni attack to demonstrate and publicize their military power. Journalist Manrishi Dhital makes this quite explicit:

After some time, both the communication and the electricity were cut off. Our previous plans, to meet all the Beni's local journalists and establish communication with them, to update the latest news to our media and to inform the members of our umbrella organization, the Nepal Journalist Association, that its members were reporting from the front line, ended in failure due to the interruption of communications (Dhital 2004a).

Dhital's article indicates that the reporters were observing the battle from the place where Division Commander "Pasang" was commanding his troops. It can be guessed that "Pasang" was high up, just behind Beni bazaar, on the way to the Arthunge hills. "Pravin" indirectly confirmed this idea saying that Commander "Pasang" was in wards 1 and 2 of Arthunge VDC, which refers to Beni bazaar and the forests surrounding the bazaar, during the attack. He also said, "Pasang was mostly high up behind Hulak Chok, located to the north-west side of the Beni bazaar and north of the army barracks." Dhital's second article (Dhital 2004b) confirms it:

After the sun rose on the hills, we came to know that we were on the northwest side [of Beni]... Around two at night, news came to Pasang's communication set. It was the voice of Third Brigade Commander "Vividha": "All the posts surrounding the officers' residences⁵⁸ have been captured. We captured some INSASs, SMGs, and SLRs. One army soldier is in our capture, what to do with him?" Pasang greeted with cheerful gesture: "Thank you! Thank you very much! Now, please take the offensive. Go ahead." At 2.15 a.m., I heard the voice of this action's Commissar "Viplav": "Pasang! What is the new report?" Pasang reported: "Friends are taking the offensive... They have cut the wire and reached very close to the barracks. We have to wait for the reports from Parivartan and Vividha." Viplav replied: "Yes, I will report to the upper ranks according to that. Please let the friends go ahead. How are our weapons working? We will win, won't we?" Pasang said only this: "They are working well. It seems that it will take a little longer. Out."

⁵⁸ Government officers' residences were located next to the army barracks on the west side.

This article indicates that the Third Brigade led by “Vividha” attacked the army barracks from the side of Mangalaghat bazaar since the officers’ residences are located on the western side of the barracks. Dhital also wrote about the blocking teams:

By two o’clock at night, the troops that went to block the army barracks in Kushma in Parbat, in the district headquarters of Baglung, and in Ghumaunetal in Myagdi sent reports that they were blocking the forces there (Dhital 2004b).

Even after the attack had been going on for more than five hours, no helicopter of the RNA came to help the security forces in Beni. Dhital mentioned the first helicopter that came to Beni:

Fighting was almost over in all other places and the battle was concentrated on the large buildings of the main barracks. When it was nearly five o’clock in the morning, we heard the sound of a helicopter up in the air but it was flying very high and could not be seen. The beating of its wings could be heard for half an hour. It came lower. As it received a counterattack, after dropping some deadly bombs, it disappeared. After that, Beni was quiet for at least half an hour. The situation of a truce was nearly created. Only some gun reports were heard. After half an hour, again intense firing started up all around the main barracks. By that time, it was already bright daylight...

The fight went on even after daybreak. Dhital continued:

Around 7.30 in the morning the voice of the First Brigade Commander “Parivartan”⁵⁹ was heard on the radio set: “All the district government offices are under our control. We came to know that there was a large number of soldiers in the District Police Office as well. There is a lot of ammunition here. Please send volunteers.” In no time Pasang sent hundreds of volunteers to search all the district government offices. Volunteers had already searched many banks and important non-government offices (Dhital 2004b).

⁵⁹ According to some Maoists I met in Rolpa in September 2004, “Parivartan”, whose real name was Nep Bahadur K.C., died at a shelter in Kapilbastu district on 13 May, due to an accident in which his security guard’s socket bomb had exploded. He was 31 years old and from Iriwang VDC of Rolpa district.

3.2.2. The government offices

At the western end of Beni bazaar lies the largest compound of government offices. The buildings of the District Administration Office, the District Development Committee's office, the DDC chairman's quarters, the DDC conference hall, and the government lawyers' office stood in that compound. As mentioned above, some 120 security force personnel from Pokhara had just arrived in Beni that night and were staying in the DDC conference hall that stood behind the DDC office. There were twenty army men on the post stationed on the roof of the DDC chairman's quarters.

A peon who works for the Chief District Officer was sleeping inside the DAO office with his wife and two sons when he heard gun reports from the mountain side to the north at 11 o'clock that night. Two hours after that, he heard a clamour outside and the Maoists entered the compound. Being afraid, the peon and his family went to hide under the bed. They stayed there until they finally went out to take refuge in the army barracks, located about 300 metres away to the west, at 4.45 a.m.. They were lucky enough to be able to escape in time. Another peon of the DDC chairman was found dead outside at the western end of the DDC conference hall. He was hit by bullets. A family of four stayed inside the building of the District Court until morning. The husband was injured.

There were other civilian victims inside the DDC chairman's quarters. Six former Maoists who had surrendered to the security forces were staying in a room on the first floor. Four of them were killed. One of the two survivors testified:

That night all of us were in a room facing the street on the first floor.⁶⁰ When firing started at 11, I and another person took shelter behind a cabinet and stayed there for seven hours until 6 next morning. Windows were broken and grenades and bullets came into the room. The other four were killed around 2 a.m. They were shot because they stayed in the centre of the room. Two of them may have been shot when they stood up to escape. The Maoists set fire to the buildings of the DDC and the DAO offices around 3.30 a.m. As fire began to come into the room, we decided to go out at 6 a.m. We ran towards the DDC conference hall, where the security forces were, with our hands raised to show we were not fighting and went inside the hall. At that time, the security forces were still in the hall. After that, the Maoists started an even more intense attack. There was firing until 9.30 a.m. Only when a helicopter came and dropped ammunition, did the Maoists start to withdraw.

⁶⁰ This room is situated just under the security post on the roof.

“Pravin” mentioned that the security forces in the DDC conference hall had not attempted to take offensive action but just responded to Maoist fire: “There was no intense return of fire from the Pokhara force staying in the conference hall.” He made it clear that they had no idea about the existence of the additional security force from Pokhara staying inside the DDC compound. In the compound of the DDC and the DAO, seven persons were killed. Among them were five civilians including a peon of the DDC chairman’s office and four surrendered Maoists. On the side of the security forces, one RNA soldier and one person of the Armed Police Force were killed. It seems that the existence of 120 personnel of the security force did not help to protect the buildings and facilities of the DDC and DAO from being set on fire. The buildings were completely destroyed.

3.2.3. The Chief District Officer

Adjoining the compound of the DDC and the DAO offices, is the compound of the District Court to the east and then the Chief District Officer’s quarters. The CDO of Myagdi, Sagarmani Parajuli, and six policemen were in the CDO’s quarters that night. Previously the Maoists had killed three CDOs in the attacks on Salleri (Solukhumbu), Mangalsen (Achham), and Khalanga (Jumla). Other CDOs had been abducted and freed after some time. It can be said that capturing a CDO is one of the Maoists’ main aims when attacking district headquarters. CDO Parajuli (2004) described his experiences that night in an interview:

I went to bed at around ten. I had already fallen asleep. I woke up after hearing the sudden sound of firing. As the Royal Nepalese Army also used to go into “practice” before, I called up the army expecting to hear that this was what was going on. We had established a separate “system” in order to facilitate contact when the regular line wasn’t working. However, that line was dead too. Then I realized the Maoists were attacking...

Firing increased. I heard many people speaking outside. I felt it was not very secure to stay here... Thinking that I might be able to survive if I went to the LDO’s (Local Development Officer) quarters, I tried to go there through a kitchen garden but came to know they had already been there...

I went slowly to the LDO quarters. Nobody was there. I tried to open the door but it was locked from the inside. I squeezed inside under the flap of the door. I felt like staying in a toilet or a corner. There is a small guest room as soon as you enter the building. I lay down there making my body as small as possible and put both hands behind my head. I stayed watching the door.

After half an hour I heard girls screaming “Salim, Salim”. I also heard boys saying “Prahar, Prahar”.⁶¹ I thought “Prahar” must be somebody’s name. I saw the blue light of their torch. I realized that they covered their torches with blue plastic sheeting in order to prevent the light from spreading. Some people came and asked, “Is somebody here?” The young female Maoists who were there answered, “We have already searched.” After that I felt relieved. They were talking while sitting on a nearby table, going outside, and firing.

I thought they would leave around three or four o’clock. But that situation continued. The battle was going on. There were continuous gun reports. I heard the sound of a helicopter.⁶² I felt it would be better now. Now I could survive...

I heard the sound of somebody running and saying: “If you want to save your life, surrender.” I felt that the situation was not yet favourable. After hearing the sound of somebody coming toward me, I thought I should not be lying down. I went outside at once and raised my hands. I surrendered. They caught me. “Are you [from] the army?” “No.” “Are you a policeman?” “No, I am an officer.” “Of which office?” “District Administration Office.” “Which position do you have in that office?” “Chief District Officer.” After that they searched my body and looked at my ID card. They asked, “Are you a commissar?” I said, “I am an officer. I don’t know what a commissar is.”⁶³ And then they took me to a commander.

According to Parajuli, when he was taken to a Maoist commander around eight o’clock in the morning, he saw a DSP (Deputy Superintendent of Police) handcuffed there. Then the Maoists had the CDO appeal to the security forces to surrender through a megaphone in three different places. As the police force in the District Police Office had already surrendered by then, he was made to appeal to the army. Even while he was appealing, fighting was going on. Parajuli continued:

In the meantime, the fighters went in front of the District Court and started firing. Bullets shot from that side came toward me. The fighters protected me from being shot. There were many people of the Maoist army. There was a lot of blood. They took me near Birendra Chok. Again I was made to appeal for them to surrender by means of a hand-held

⁶¹ These words may be Maoists’ code words. It is known that they use the code words to communicate with each other during battle.

⁶² The first helicopter came to Beni around 5.20 a.m. but it did not stay long.

⁶³ From these conversations it can be deduced that this Maoist did not even know what a CDO was.

megaphone. A third time I requested them to surrender from the top of the post office. At that time they set fire to the army post in front of us...

3.2.4. The District Police Office

From Dhital's second article (2004b), it can be guessed that the main force that made an attack on the District Police Office was the PLA's First Brigade led by Commander "Parivartan" and the main forces that made an attack on the barracks of the Shri Kali Prasad Battalion were the PLA's Second and Third Brigades.⁶⁴ The District Police Office (DPO) and the army barracks were their main targets. As in other attacks on district headquarters, it was easier for the Maoists to capture the police office than the army barracks. Though they were unable to capture the army barracks, they captured the police office around 7.30 a.m.

There were about 90 policemen and 20 army personnel stationed on the DPO, situated at the eastern end of the government offices. One of the policemen⁶⁵ who had been abducted by the Maoists after surrendering said:

Firing and bombing started from the direction of the hills and the bazaar. At around one or 1.30 a.m., they entered the compound and started to fire from closer distance. They attacked mainly from the north side. After it got light, they broke the fence and some 1,000 guerrillas came into the compound. They started to appeal us to surrender. We surrendered at 7.30 a.m. and were abducted around eight. After that they set fire to the buildings of the DPO.

Dhital added about the capture of the DPO:

When it was nearly eight o'clock in the morning, we captured 34 policemen including DSP Rana Bahadur Gautam and two soldiers of the royal army. Before this, we had captured CDO Sagarmani Parajuli as well. After removing weapons, bullets, and many other war materials, soldiers spread kerosene around⁶⁶ and set fire to the DPO at 8.30 a.m. In all the main government offices except the hospital, flames started to rise... (Dhital 2004b).

⁶⁴ A Maoist whom I met in Rolpa in September 2004 said that the First Brigade attacked the DPO, the District Jail, and the army barracks as well from the eastern side. He was with the force of the First Brigade during the attack.

⁶⁵ He and another policeman were freed next day after being injured in air bombing by the RNA helicopter but the other 37, including the CDO, two army men and 34 policemen, were freed only after seventeen days.

⁶⁶ They looted kerosene from shops in Beni bazaar.

The Maoists brought many wire-cutters to cut barbed wire surrounding the compound of the security forces. When I went to Beni on 25 March I still could see that the barbed wire surrounding the northern and eastern sides of the DPO was cut in many places. After cutting the barbed wire, they blew holes in three places in the fence with bombs and entered the compound. In fact, it was the security forces in the DPO who suffered the heaviest casualties. Thirteen policemen and two army personnel were killed there. According to the newly appointed CDO of Myagdi, whom I met on 2 May in Beni, in total 19 policemen were killed and three were still missing. Among the nineteen, two were under the unified command of the army and the bodies of three were found later in the Kali Gandaki river. Two others, who were on duty in the district jail, were killed when they came out from the huge rock in the river bank where they were taking shelter during the night. They were said to be shot by the Maoists from the opposite bank of the Kali Gandaki river when they came out by mistake, taking the Maoists in combat dress to be security forces coming to help them.

3.2.5. The Shri Kali Prasad Battalion

From the fact that the Maoists are still using modern weapons they had looted from the Royal Nepalese Army's barracks in Ghorahi, Mangalsen, and Sandhikharka, it is clear that capturing of army battalion barracks is quite important for them. "Kirti", the area in-charge of the Maoists I met in Takam VDC, said proudly; "The Beni attack was the first action on a *gaṇa* (battalion) of the RNA led by a colonel." She also said: "Our original plan was to occupy the army camp and to free the soldiers after giving political training to them." However, as we have seen, they were not able to take the army barracks.

A lieutenant colonel who led the Shri Kali Prasad Battalion testified about how the Maoists fought:

They occupied the compound of the British Gurkha Welfare Centre adjoining the army barracks on the east and attacked from there. After the first helicopter had come and left Beni around five in the morning, the Maoists started the most intensive attack on the barracks. They came into the compound but soon withdrew after we struck back. They came like waves one after another. I saw a woman Maoist trying to climb a tree even after she had been hit by 15 to 16 bullets. During this most intense firing from five to six in the morning, five army personnel died inside the compound.

Six bodies of the Maoists, including a woman guerrilla, were found inside the compound of the barracks. According to a member of the Red Cross Society in Beni, who participated in collecting the bodies after the attack, all of them were lying in the northern side of the huge rock that stands on the right hand of the gate. He said that four of them looked like Magars and the other two like Tharus.⁶⁷ A lieutenant colonel said they were shot dead during this early morning's intense firing. An AK-47 was found near the body of a Maoist wearing a belt with the name of "Ramesh". It was the first time the government side had evidence of the Maoists using this assault rifle. Since neither the RNA nor the police have this weapon, it is clear that the Maoists brought them from outside the country. "Pravin" admitted that it was their AK-47 and that it was made in China (not in Russia). According to an article published in the weekly magazine *Samaya* (31 Vaishakh 2061), the "People's Radio" broadcast by the Maoists in the Western Region claimed in February 2004 that they had 66 AK-47s (Baral and Khanal 2004).

The Maoists admitted in the statement published immediately after the attack in the name of Western Division Commissar "Viplav" and Commander "Pasang" that two of the PLA's brigade vice-commanders, "Yoddha" and "Bahuwir", a battalion commander "Vishal", and a battalion vice-commander "Vayu" died during the attack. I particularly tried to identify the places where the two brigade vice-commanders died. There was no evidence found from the ID cards and documents collected from the bodies of the Maoists that showed them to be high-level commanders. However, "Pravin" made it clear that "Yoddha" had been killed in the compound of the army barracks.⁶⁸ "Pravin" indicated that the six bodies found in the compound of the army barracks were those that were left behind after they had carried some of them away. He also said that after a brigade vice-commander had been shot dead they decided to withdraw from the compound of the army barracks. According to "Kalpana" (2004), "Yoddha" belonged to PLA's Second Brigade. "Yoddha" was "Kalpana"'s husband. This indicates that the Second Brigade made an attack on the army barracks.

3.2.6. War clinic

Thirteen "volunteers" who had been abducted by the Maoists from Chimkhola VDC (as described above) were waiting from 1 a.m. in the Arhunge hills near Beni for the wounded to arrive. In fact, most of the civilian "volunteers" were taken there to help carry the wounded and looted goods, including weapons and ammunition. According to the volunteers from Chimkhola, it was between 1.30 and 2.00 a.m. when the first injured

⁶⁷ Magars from Rolpa and Rukum districts are numerous in the core fighting force of the PLA. Tharus come from the Tarai.

⁶⁸ "Eagle", a Maoist I met in Rolpa in September 2004, confirmed this.

person was brought. They left there for the west around 3.00 a.m. with the wounded on stretchers. "Pravin" said that there were few casualties on their side until 4.30 a.m. and that they suffered the heaviest toll after it got light. He also said that the highest toll was seen in Birendra Chok area, along the street from in front of the District Court, the DAO, and the DDC offices leading to the army barracks.

The closest treatment centre to Birendra Chok was the one set up in a house of a local Newar. The Maoists stayed in his house from 11 p.m. to 9.30 a.m. next morning. Though the house owner and his four family members stayed in a room on the ground floor and did not come out until the Maoists left, they could see and hear their activities through a window that faced the door of the room the Maoists were using. He described the situation:

Some volunteers were seen giving water and conveying messages to fighters and some children bringing bombs and ammunition outside. Women health workers were giving treatment. Most of the slightly injured went back to the front line after getting the first aid treatment. An injured child of about fifteen years old was crying. They were asking the seriously injured persons: "Which group are you from?" "Where are you from?" Many people were speaking non-Nepali languages like Rolpali [the Kham language spoken by the Magars in Rolpa and Rukum districts] and a Hindi-like language [such as would be spoken by people from the Tarai]. Later we came to know that they ate all kinds of food including biscuits, chau-chau instant noodles, *ciurā* (beaten rice), and drank the cold drinks in our shop. But they didn't drink any alcohol. They used a room on the ground floor, two rooms including a bedroom, a secret room that we use for *pūjā* (religious ritual), and a veranda on the first floor. They used all the bedding and cushions in our house and even some clothes. We had to throw them away as they became so soiled with blood.

A tailor's family whose rented house was used as a treatment centre, as described above, testified that more than a hundred injured persons were brought there. His wife described their activities:

They brought the wounded along the main road from the direction of Hulak Chok [situated on the way to Birendra Chok]. Two men were doing treatments. A man wearing gloves was giving injections and treating wounds and another was giving tablets to the patients. I didn't see them taking out bullets. It seemed that they were doing treatments mainly to stop bleeding. There were many women. Some women were even carrying small babies. Many of them were speaking languages that we didn't understand. Some said that they had come from Rukum.

The Maoists set up another treatment centre in an open space on a lane situated just 50 metres north of the tailor's house. A nurse happened to observe what was going on there:

Around 1 a.m. they brought a portable table there and set it up in the lane. They stayed there until around 4 a.m. They put the wounded on it and treated them. Their way of treatment looked so rough. I saw a health worker taking out a bullet with his hand after opening the wound with a knife. He even didn't ask the patient if he was feeling any pain. When I checked the remaining drugs later, I saw there were injections of Diclofenac for pain relief and Buscopan tablets that were usually used for abdominal pain. They may have used both of them at one time to lessen the pain. I saw a girl in combat dress who looked like a Bahun or a Kshetri, aged around sixteen, shot in front of the house, seven houses beyond ours, and dragged along from there. She was shot in her chest and weeping. Another Maoist scolded her saying: "Don't cry. We have either to kill or to die." Soon after that she died.

Another citizen living in this area saw the Maoists placing their red party flags over the bodies and taking them away. The nurse described her interaction with the Maoists also:

When a helicopter came flying overhead at 5.20 a.m., a Maoist came and asked me for a key to the gate of our house. I said that I didn't have it as I was just a tenant. Then he broke the lock with some tool and came in. He went to a water tap to wash his face and then mixed *sattū*⁶⁹ with water to eat. He asked me: "Mother, could you sleep at night?" And he asked for mustard oil and cotton to clean his gun. When I told him to leave soon, he said: "You don't need to be afraid." After that he moved to the roof of the neighbouring house and left for a hill at the back.

On the eastern side of Beni bazaar, treatment centres were set up in at least three places: in the District Agriculture Development Office in front of the District Police Office,⁷⁰ in the vacant offices of the Thakali Samaj, and in a private house in Ganesh Tol. I could not find any eyewitness who saw their activities in the DAD office or in the house of the Thakali Samaj, as there was only one guard staying in the former, who didn't dare to go out, while

⁶⁹ *Sattū* is like field rations made by frying corn or wheat flour and mixing it with salt and spices.

⁷⁰ They also made use of the compound of the temple adjoining the DAD office.

the latter was located in an isolated place near the river. In the private house in Ganesh Tol, the Maoists came in only at seven in the morning. They used the front room of this house. A member of the family said:

During the night they only came here to drink water. They brought some ten to twelve injured persons here after seven. Two or three girls treated the patients. I saw them using a spoon from our kitchen to take out a bullet. One was shot in his shoulder and another in his thigh. A man shot in the chest died while receiving treatment.

A shopkeeper in Mangalaghat bazaar could do nothing to stop the Maoists using his house as a treatment centre and taking sacks of rice and sugar from his shop for their “struggle” (*morcā*). A woman Maoist who first came in his house asked him: “How many army personnel are stationed here?” He answered: “I have no idea but as it’s a battalion there must be many.” She spoke politely. After he had some conversation with her, he stayed inside a room on the first floor with his family. During the night time they could only hear some of their conversation. He said:

They were using a kitchen for treatment. I heard voices of a man, possibly a doctor, and some nurses. A girl, maybe a nurse, was telling the others not to turn on their torches. They were also saying that it was convenient that there was a plentiful supply of water in this house. At one point I went out of the room to fetch my aged mother who was alone in a room on the second floor. At that time, I could see many people with white bandages lying on the floor. I could not get my mother with me as some Maoist asked: “Who are you?” So my mother was alone until 4 a.m. Around 3 a.m. I heard some two or three people talking with regret in their voices about the fact that so many of their friends had fallen. They took a lot of goods from our shop including food and drinks and ate all the food in the kitchen. In the morning, some Maoists with guns came to buy some food and drink in my shop. I said, “You have already taken many goods. What is the point of paying for one or two bottles of Coke?” Then they apologized: “We are very sorry. Our friends should not have done that.” They were still here when the helicopter was flying overhead and left only around 10.30 a.m.

The Maoists used five classrooms on the ground floor of Lokdeep Secondary Boarding School in Mangalaghat. They were coming and going there until 11 a.m. After they had left, one injured policeman was found there. He was one of the security personnel involved in the first exchange of fire with the Maoists in between Mangalaghat bazaar and the army barracks. After surrendering, he was treated by a Maoist health worker.

“Pravin” said that there was a MBBS doctor in the Western Division of the PLA. I tried to identify where he was during the attack but I could not.

3.2.7. Beni bazaar

An ex-Indian soldier living in Birendra Chok in front of the District Court said that as it got brighter, the firing became more intense:

I saw many Maoists in the street in front of my house. They were shooting .303 rifles and SLRs. It seemed that experienced Maoists were shooting SLRs and women and less experienced persons were shooting .303 rifles. I also heard the sound of machine guns like GPMGs and LMGs from the roofs of the neighbours' houses. They used a lot of socket bombs as well. They set fire to the buildings of the DDC and DAO at around 4 o'clock in the morning. The CDO's quarters and the building of the District Court were set on fire around 8 a.m. At about 8.30, the CDO was brought here and made an appeal through a megaphone. He was saying: “I am the Chief District Officer of Myagdi. The Maoists have already captured the District Police Office. Hand over your weapons and surrender.” After that, around 9 a.m., an 81-mm mortar killed four Maoists in front of the District Court.⁷¹ They carried away three bodies and one body and a leg remained there. After that they started to withdraw slowly.

Just in front of the main building of the District Police Office stood a house owned by Netra Bahadur Mahat, a district president of the Nepali Congress (Democrat) party. This house burnt down completely and two civilians were burnt to death inside the house. The house was rented out as a restaurant and lodge named the “Baglung Hotel”. Both of those who died were guests who had just returned from the Gulf countries and were on their way home. It was mysterious how it caught fire. Some people in the bazaar said the Maoists had intentionally set fire to it in order to make the area bright at night time. But “Pravin” denied it. He claimed that a fire missile had hit the house by accident. He said they had let the family of the tenants come out of the house before that and had taken them to some secure place. Ghanshyam Khadka who was in a friend's hotel at that time happened to see this tenant family. Khadka said they were taken to the hotel by Maoists around 3 or 4 a.m. The tenant did not inform the Maoists that two guests were staying in rooms on the first floor.

It was around 12.30 p.m. when some 30 Maoists entered the office of the Pashchim Anchal Finance Company. According to the branch manager of this office, many of them looked like Dalits or Magars. There was a woman

⁷¹ It is not certain which side fired this mortar.

of around twenty years old. They asked the branch manager for the key to the place where cash was kept. When he refused, they threatened him, saying: “We will blast it.” Then he gave them the key. They searched the office and took away Rs. 195,284 in cash, two computers, two printers, a fax machine, a gun, and bullets. He saw a Maoist informing somebody through a communication set that they had taken Rs 200,000 in cash. They left at 4.30 a.m.

At the northern end of Beni bazaar lies the big compound of the Myagdi District Hospital. Despite the fact that it is located not far from the front line (about one km away), the Maoists did not use the facilities of this hospital. There were two doctors and six or seven patients in the hospital that night. Though they brought two seriously injured Maoists in a jeep inside the hospital compound, they ran away leaving the two and the jeep when a helicopter came flying overhead. The two Maoists in the jeep were found to be dead. Apart from these two, no other injured Maoists were brought to the hospital. It was around 8 a.m. when a Maoist, about 40 years old, in plain clothes,⁷² accompanied by a boy, came to the doctor’s quarters and asked for stretchers. He said in a polite way: “If you can’t give us stretchers, could you come with us?” A doctor gave him the key of the room where stretchers were kept. The Maoist also said: “If you need, we will return them later.” They took all seventeen stretchers in the hospital but nothing else.

3.2.8. On the bank of the Kali Gandaki river

Near the suspension bridge called *Kālo Pul* (black bridge) over the Kali Gandaki river, just behind Beni bazaar, river-protection works were going on. The contractor and his workers stayed on the opposite bank (the Parbat district side) at night. They saw a group of Maoists covering dead bodies with red party flags and offering silent prayers while doing *lāl salām* (red greeting) raising their right arms on the river bank at around six or seven o’clock. “Pravin” confirmed that they were actually himself and his comrades. He said:

I was responsible for burying nine bodies who had died during the battle and carried them to the bank of the Kali Gandaki, where some volunteers had already made a hole to bury the bodies. After a five-minute simple tribute programme, we buried them. I didn’t know whose bodies they were.

⁷² “Pravin” indicated that this Maoist was himself.

3.2.9. Mangalaghat bazaar

The Maoists who came to Mangalaghat bazaar were one of the main forces that had attacked the army barracks. They used some ten or twelve shops there as resting places during the battle. One of them was the restaurant owned by a 39-year-old Magar woman. There were only females, including her, three daughters and her mother, in the house. After her husband had left her, she made a living by running a restaurant on the ground floor of her house. The Maoists opened a door and came in the house immediately after the firing started at 11 p.m. She described what they did:

First, they took a table away to use it as a shelter. They drank most of the soft drinks and some beer here. They didn't take hard drinks but threw them in the street. All of them were under thirty. There were many women and children whose guns were touching the ground because of their small height. They went to the front line to fight and then came back here to take a rest and eat. As one came back, another left. They went to fight by turns. They just appeared not to care about their own lives.

Around 9.30 a.m. her elder sister came to the house because she was worried about them. After seeing the disorder there, she scolded the Maoists. One of the Maoists apologized, saying that they had made mistakes. When her elder sister came, she noticed that the Rs. 30,000 cash that she was keeping on a shelf for a relative was missing. Some Maoists were still there but she was too afraid to ask them about the missing money.

3.3. Retreating

3.3.1. Decision

According to "Pravin", when the RNA helicopter flew back to Beni at 9.30 a.m., the battle turned into a situation of retaliation by the RNA. So the Maoists decided to withdraw. "Pravin" explained about the timing of withdrawal:

Actually, the battle lasted longer than we had expected. If we had continued the battle, we could have captured the army camp. Helicopters could not do anything to us. But we made a decision to retreat, regarding the capture of a CDO and the District Police Office as our victory.

It appears that entrance of the helicopters of the Royal Nepalese Army was one of the main causes for the Maoists to decide to stop the battle and withdraw from Beni. The first helicopter came over Beni at 5.20 a.m. but it flew away at 5.45. Then helicopters came at 9.30 a.m. and dropped

ammunition for the security forces. Some helicopters came again at 10.30 a.m. Manrishi Dhital also wrote about the timing of the withdrawal:

After the army had started to drop bombs on the civilian residential area in the course of the aerial bombing after nine o'clock in the morning, the rebels decided to leave the town around 10.30 a.m. in order to avoid civilian casualties. And they started to go back each by their own route. After Commander Pasang declared the end of the ground battle, we also decided to leave the town... (Dhital 2004b).

3.3.2. Taking breakfast

When it got light, the people in Beni had opportunities to watch the activities of the Maoists. Many eyewitnesses in Beni bazaar said that the Maoists were openly walking in the bazaar in the morning and even some were shopping in the bazaar while there was no security force on the street. Some Maoists were seen dancing with their weapons in the air on the roof of the District Police Office when they had captured it. Even on the street, many guerrillas were seen dancing and singing.

Even with helicopters flying overhead, it seemed that the Maoists were composed. The testimony of a restaurant owner, whose shop is on the Pari Beni side (the Parbat district side), clearly exemplified this. There are several eating houses on the Pari Beni side, close to a suspension bridge connecting with Beni's main bazaar (on the Myagdi district side). It is only several minutes' walk from the District Police Office. About 100 armed Maoists came to take breakfast there. One eating house owner described what he had seen:

They came here around 9.30 a.m. after finishing the transportation of the weapons and ammunition they had captured from the District Police Office. They divided into groups and entered the restaurants. In my shop some 15 Maoists came in. All of them were holding long rifles. Their age seemed to be between fifteen and late twenties. Half of them were women. They were in a sweat and looked tired but very excited as well. They even looked happy. Seeing them laughing and chatting, I thought maybe they do have a heart. I am sure they were not afraid to die at all. They ate all the unsold foods which had been prepared the previous morning and paid about Rs 300 after calculating how much they had eaten. While they were eating, a helicopter came overhead. They looked a little afraid and one of them said: "It may affect the public, we will leave soon."

3.3.3. Leaving Beni

By 11 a.m. most of the Maoists had left Beni. They took the same route as when they came to Beni. The biggest attacking force went via the Arthunge hills. I had a chance to watch a video tape filmed by a local in Beni. The camera caught the scene of Maoists climbing the hill behind the bazaar towards the Arthunge hills. They just looked ordinary, not in a hurry, but walking normally. A person in Mangalaghat bazaar described how the Maoists had left, saying: “They went away comfortably (*unīharū ānanda sita gae*).”

However, it was not the end of the battle. They had to face aerial bombing from helicopters on their way back. Dhital described it as follows:

Bombs dropped in front of us with a huge sound.⁷³ We slipped down there... And two fighters who had been walking before us, carrying an injured person and an injured woman fighter, all of the three became covered with blood and scattered on the ground here and there in front of us. A stretcher was some distance away and broken. There was a big hole on the ground and blasted pieces of bombs were scattered in the surrounding area. We came to know later that a bomb dropped from a helicopter had hit an injured person. And they were killed on the spot...

On 21 March aerial bombing on the procession of our People’s Army continued all day long. The air was held by the Royal Army and the ground was held by the People’s Army. A policeman captured by us was killed on the way by a bomb dropped on the line of the People’s Army... Due to this whole day of aerial bombing, half a dozen of the rebels died on the way (Dhital 2004b).

One of the “volunteers” abducted from Chimkhola VDC testified:

We volunteers, carrying the wounded on stretchers and in *dokos* (baskets) were walking at the end of the line. There were more than a hundred injured persons. The length of the line of people walking was nearly 1 km. At about 8 a.m. we arrived in Vaviyachaur VDC. The wounded were taken into the villagers’ houses and given treatment there. We could sleep for a while during that time. We left there for Darwang at about noon. While we were walking, a helicopter came and dropped a bomb near us. After that all of us from Chimkhola decided to escape. When we entered a house to

⁷³ It can be guessed that this happened in the Arthunge hills.

drink water in Ratodhunga of Darwang VDC, we took the chance to run away.

It seems that the group with the wounded took the direct way to Darwang through the Arthunge hills and Vaviyachaur. The local people in Darwang bazaar said that the first group with wounded arrived there at around 10 a.m. on 21 March, and many wounded started to come at around 1 p.m. They treated the patients in five places in Darwang bazaar. A local said:

Persons with light injuries were walking normally. It may be due to the lack of stretchers or volunteers, I don't know, but I saw a man in his mid-twenties, who had a bullet injury in his throat, walking. He looked very sick and took a long rest in front of our house. Most of the people didn't speak much and looked very tired. Some volunteers looked like they were reluctantly carrying the wounded. Some low-ranking Maoist was saying that they had captured everything in Beni but I could not believe him.

When they left for Beni the previous day, the local Maoists had ordered the people of Darwang to prepare meals for their breakfast but as they came late, the food was cold. Furthermore, Darwang also became an insecure place for them as a helicopter came at around 4.30 p.m. and dropped a group of security forces on the top of a hill near there. When an army helicopter came, there were thousands of Maoists in Darwang but it didn't drop bombs. By 1 a.m. at night the last injured Maoist had finally left Darwang. The next early morning, at around 6.30 a.m. on 22 March, there was an exchange of fire in Devasthan VDC near Darwang bazaar between the Maoists and the security forces that had been dropped by helicopter. The battle lasted for an hour. According to the local people, seven Maoists were killed in this battle.

“Pravin” said that their original plan was to assemble in Takam VDC again after the attack and to hold a victory celebration. They had even kept some cows and food for that purpose in Takam and the neighbouring villages, however they could not hold the celebration due to the aerial bombings by army helicopters. The main force with Division Commander “Pasang” had to change their route to avoid the aerial threat. They left the route to Darwang for the south and crossed the hills into Baglung district. When “Pasang” gave an interview to the BBC Nepali language service by satellite telephone on the night of 23 March, they were in Tarakhola, Baglung (Dhital 2004b). The next morning the security forces attacked them again. Dhital wrote about this attack and their difficult travel:

The Royal Army started to attack again from the highpoints of Tarakhola at five in the morning of 24 March. Everybody woke up in the morning and decided to leave that place. We made places for the wounded to stay in the dense jungle area of Tarakhola. After the attack had started, a helicopter came and began dropping bombs. We walked through reed bushes. If there had not been reed bushes on that steep slope, we might have slipped and fallen into the river. The reed bushes prevented us from slipping down by accident. Crossing the open and naked mountain, we arrived in Patale village of Myagdi district at night. Until our arrival in Patale, nobody could eat two meals. I felt that the most important things in war are food and ammunition. When the fighting started in Tarakhola, everyone carried sacks of rice from the food stores. We three journalists too took 30 kg sacks of rice to carry. On the way I saw some fighters and the wounded eating uncooked rice. They had been hungry for many days and the injured began to walk on crutches during those two or three days of intense fighting (Dhital 2004b).

3.3.4. Prisoners of war

After the CDO and the police force led by a DSP in the District Police Office had surrendered, Maoists abducted them as prisoners of war (POWs). They took about 40 POWs including the CDO, the DSP, two army men, and about 35 policemen with them and left Beni at around 10.30 a.m. for the west via the Arthunge hills. Two policemen who were injured in the aerial bombing returned the next day and one policeman died on the way, as noted above. The force with the POWs also took a roundabout way, by way of Tarakhola in Baglung.⁷⁴ Most probably the POWs were with the main force led by “Pasang”.⁷⁵ According to the interview with CDO Sagarmani Parajuli, they were taken by a long roundabout route of the Arthunge hills – Vaviyachaur – Armat – Tarakhola (Baglung district) – Mundagaun (Myagdi) – Muna – Jaljala – Pelma (Rukum) – Hukam – Mahat – Thawang (Rolpa). After fifteen days the POWs were taken to Thawang, the headquarters of their Vishesh Jilla (Special District), on 5 April. “Pravin” said: “We took the POWs to the Yenana of Nepal.”⁷⁶

The CPN (Maoist) issued a statement in the name of Western Division Commissar “Viplav” and Commander “Pasang” the day after the attack, asking the government to exchange the POWs they had abducted with their leaders including the central committee members Matrika Yadav and Suresh

⁷⁴ According to Parajuli (2004).

⁷⁵ According to a villager in Darwang, twelve policemen were taken by way of Darwang.

⁷⁶ Yenana was the base area of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army led by Mao Tse-tung.

Ale Magar⁷⁷ and area bureau member Kiran Sharma. However, they released all the POWs from Thawang under the mediation of ICRC (International Committee of Red Cross) on 6 April. After receiving the offer of the release of POWs from the Maoist side, the representatives of ICRC went to Thawang in Rolpa district by helicopter to take them back.

3.4. Results

3.4.1. Human casualties

In a statement issued under the names of “Pasang” and “Viplav” the Maoists claimed that 125 “Royal Army men” and 26 policemen had been killed during Beni attack,⁷⁸ but there is no basis for establishing this number of casualties. According to the newly appointed CDO of Myagdi whom I met on 3 May 2004, 16 policemen were killed during the Beni attack, three bodies of policemen were found later, and three policemen were still missing. As the Royal Nepalese Army admitted that 14 army personnel were killed during the battle, in total 33 security personnel were killed and three were missing.

In this Beni attack, civilian casualties were higher than ever before. According to a list made by the CDO office in Beni, 19 civilians were killed during and after the attack.⁷⁹ Of these, eight, including four ex-Maoists who had surrendered, were killed in crossfire in Beni. Three boys between six and twelve years old in nearby villages were killed in separate incidents when grenades left behind by the Maoists exploded. Another eight persons, seven in one place in Jyamrukot VDC and one in Bhagawati VDC, were killed by the helicopter aerial bombing after the attack.

Regarding casualties on the Maoist side, government and Maoist accounts differ substantially. The Defence Ministry claimed immediately after the attack that the security forces had killed 500 Maoists. Since the number of bodies found was many fewer than this, this number would seem to be an exaggeration. A lieutenant colonel of the Shri Kali Prasad Battalion claimed that they had confirmed 202 bodies of the Maoists within one kilometre of Beni. However, the Beni branch of the Red Cross Society that collected and buried the bodies left by the Maoists confirmed 67 bodies in total in and around Beni bazaar. In this data, the persons who had been killed by aerial bombing and in the clashes after the main attack are not included. Accordingly, the actual number is supposed to be bigger than this. On the other hand, “Pravin” gave precise figures: 78 persons including 6 volunteers died on the Maoist side, and 422 persons including 14 serious

⁷⁷ It was reported that both of them were arrested in Lucknow in India in February 2004 and handed over to the government of Nepal.

⁷⁸ From *Maoist Information Bulletin-9*.

⁷⁹ This data is based on records submitted in Myagdi district. It was reported that some other civilians were killed during the aerial bombing in Baglung district.

cases were injured. The Maoists admitted that two brigade vice-commanders, “Yoddha” (Second Brigade) and “Bahuwir” (Third Brigade), a battalion commander “Vishal” and a battalion vice-commander “Vayu” were among the dead. From the ID cards that were found with the bodies, some platoon level commanders were also killed during the attack.

3.4.2. Weapons captured

According to *Maoist Information Bulletin-9*, the Maoists captured 35 SLRs, 65 .303 rifles, 14 INSAS rifles, one M-16, 7 pistols, 3 LMG,s one 2-inch mortar, 50,000 bullets, and 10 mortar rounds. On the other hand, the weapons and tools captured by the Royal Nepalese Army were: one AK-47, one LMG, 5 SLRs, three .303 rifles, 17 wire-cutters, and others.⁸⁰

3.4.3. Damage to the government facilities

The Maoists set fire to various government offices. The buildings of the District Development Committee and the District Administration Office were completely destroyed and those of the District Police Office, the District Court, the District Forest Office, the District Jail, and the Myagdi library⁸¹ were badly damaged. Equipment in the telephone exchange station was also damaged. All of 515 lines went dead. Documents in Nepal Bank, the land revenue office, and the district education office were burnt. Question papers for the SLC examinations in the district education office were also burnt. As the question papers had leaked out in the bazaar, new questions had to be prepared for the examination that started on 24 March.

4. After-images of the Maoists

4.1. Remains

The Maoists left some problems with the people in Beni and Mangalaghat. One of the most serious ones was the bodies left behind. Since the government did not take responsibility, civilian volunteers under the initiative of the local branch of the Red Cross Society in Beni buried them. In fact, the Maoists dug holes in some places to bury bodies beforehand but most of the bodies were left on the spot. Among those, about 45 bodies were buried in one place on the river bank of Kali Gandaki and another 10 in the river bank of Myagdi near Mangalaghat bazaar. Some were buried in the

⁸⁰ According to an article published in the local daily paper *Dhorpātan* (23 March 2004).

⁸¹ The small building of the Myagdi library stood close to the DDC compound. The Maoists did not destroy the Arthunge Village Development Committee’s office situated between the library and the DDC compound.

jungle behind Beni, en route to the Arthunge hills. Some of the civilian volunteers who had helped to collect bodies testified that there were some bodies covered with red communist flags.⁸² Some ID cards and documents were found on the bodies. They said that ID cards included those from all the four brigades of the Western Division of the PLA.

A body found alone on the river bank of Kali Gandaki was covered with a party flag. According to a person who had collected this body, it was wrapped in a green blanket used by the police, which showed the possibility of his being killed in the District Police Office. An ID card and some other documents were found in his pocket. From the ID card he was identified as a platoon commander with the party name “Akrosh”. He was from the Vishesh Jilla (Special District) and belonged to the “Mangalsen” First Brigade, the Third Battalion, the C Company and the number 1 Platoon. A document found from his pocket shows that there were three “assault groups”, a “discharge group”, a “rifle supply group”, a “mining group”, “headquarters”, and a “health post” in his force. “Akrosh” was leading “assault-1 group” consisting of twelve members and another two assault groups were led by other platoon commanders. It also shows that each fighter got two to four grenades and about fifty bullets. A small notebook in which their code words were written was also found on the body of a platoon commander “Elat”. This proves that they were using code words during the battle.

4.2. Controversial issues

There are some controversial issues regarding the Maoists that I heard in Beni and other places. I tried to clarify if they were true or just rumours, but I could not confirm them. Here are some of those issues.

4.2.1. Yogis

Many people in Beni mentioned a group of *yogīs* (Hindu ascetics) who came to Beni bazaar several days before the attack. They said that they were in a group of several persons and went around the bazaar visiting each household and playing music. Some people said that yogis usually stayed at a sanctuary in Galeshwar, located at a distance of 3 kilometres from Beni, at night but those yogis stayed in an open space in front of the District Police Office. They left Beni a couple of days before the attack. The people in Beni suspected that they might be Maoist spies. Some people even said that they saw one of the yogis holding a cordless phone.

⁸² They guessed that bodies with party flags might be those of commanders.

4.2.2. Pregnant Maoist

One of the stories that I heard most frequently when I visited Beni in March was that of a pregnant guerrilla who had been injured and given birth to a baby. The source of the story was a village of the Arthunge hills about 45 minutes' climb from Beni bazaar. The people in Beni said that they heard this story from villagers there. It was said that a pregnant Maoist had been seriously injured in the battle and was operated upon to remove the baby in a school in the Arthunge hills. She died after giving birth to the baby. This story was spread immediately after the attack and some of the civilian volunteers who had collected bodies tried to find a female with signs of an operation but they found no such body. I asked some villagers in the Arthunge hills about this story but nobody had witnessed it. They only heard about it. But a shopkeeper I met in the Arthunge hills said that he had seen a woman aged about forty in plain clothes holding a newly born baby. This woman with an old man and another woman passed through in front of his house at around 5.30 a.m. on 21 March. I could not verify if they were Maoists.

“Pravin” denied the truth of the story, saying: “That story is completely untrue. We have never taken a pregnant woman into the battlefield.” He even said that they were going to take action against the journalists who had published articles about the story.⁸³

4.2.3. Stimulants

Some officers in the Shri Kali Prasad Battalion claimed that the Maoist fighters were injecting stimulants during the battle. Even some people in Beni bazaar mentioned that many syringes were left on the street. However, I could not find any proof as nobody could clarify if any stimulants had been found and as I could not find anyone who had witnessed any Maoist using injections on the battlefield.

4.2.4. A video tape filmed by a Maoist

It is true that the Royal Nepalese Army happened to seize a video tape filmed by a Maoist from a bag left behind. As noted above, Dhital (2004b) wrote that a war correspondent of the Western Division of the PLA, “Chetan”, was filming with a video camera. He also indicated in his article that “Chetan” was hurt during the battle. So it can be guessed that the videotape seized by the RNA was filmed by “Chetan”.

An army officer I met in the Shri Kali Prasad Battalion said that the scenes of mass gatherings held in some place of their base area before they

⁸³ The local weekly *Myāgdī Sandeś* and the national weekly magazine *Nepāl* published articles about this story.

marched to Beni were shown in that video tape. According to him, Division Commander “Pasang” was seen in the tape announcing: “The number of our force is 14,500”, and “We have to fight for three days and three nights until we capture Beni”. These two phrases were reported by some media including the national daily paper *Kāntipur*.⁸⁴ However, “Pravin” denied its credibility. He claimed that their force was only 6,000 including 3,800 armed members of the PLA and 2,200 unarmed “volunteers”, and that their original plan was to end the attack early the following morning. Since I could not watch this video tape, I cannot clarify this.

4.2.5. Possibility of Maoists shot by Maoists

I met some persons in Beni who suspected some Maoists had fallen due to bullets mistakenly shot by their own comrades. Some people even heard a Maoist having a brawl with another, saying that bullets hit their own friend. Third Battalion Commander “Avinash” said in his interview (Paudel, Matrika 2004) that some guerrillas inside the compound of the army barracks had been killed by an 81-mm mortar shot by the Maoists.

4.2.6. Helicopter

A night-vision helicopter could not come to Beni to help the security force. An army officer in the Shri Kali Prasad Battalion said that it did come to Pokhara from Kathmandu but could not reach Beni because it was raining in Pokhara. But in fact it was not raining at all that night in Pokhara. It is said that a DSP in the District Police Office requested the security forces in Pokhara many times to send a helicopter. A helicopter came at around 5.20 a.m. but returned soon without doing anything. As he could not get help from Pokhara, the DSP was said to have thrown a communication set down and surrendered at 7.30 a.m. despite the fact that they had not yet finished their ammunition.

4.3. Images of the Maoists

4.3.1. In the eyes of the general public

Although most of the people in Beni did not venture to talk to the Maoists, the expressions they used when they talked about the Maoists show some common patterns. What follows are some of the expressions I heard most frequently.

⁸⁴ Issue of 30 March 2004.

Age

Most of the armed Maoists were under 25 years old.

There were many children carrying long guns that almost reached the ground due to their small height.

There were some senior “volunteers” over fifty years old.

Gender and ethnic group/caste

More than 30 % of the armed Maoists were women.

Most of the armed Maoists were Dalits (low castes), Mongoloids and Tharus.

Most of the volunteers were either Magars or Dalits.

There were also Kshetris, Bahuns, and Tharus among them.

There were many Maoists with black faces.⁸⁵

Languages

The Maoists were speaking some language of western Nepal.

They were speaking languages that the people in the bazaar didn't understand.

Some Maoists were speaking a Hindi-like language.⁸⁶

They were using code language while checking memos.

Equipment and dress

Some Maoists were holding communication sets that looked like cordless phones and communicating with people elsewhere.

Armed Maoists were wearing combat dress very similar to that of the RNA.

Most of them were wearing cloth shoes of the “Gold Star” brand.⁸⁷

Some Maoists bought “Gold Star” shoes in Beni bazaar.

The body of a Maoist was later found, holding new “Gold Star” shoes that he had just bought in Beni.

⁸⁵ It appeared that they smeared their faces with black powder.

⁸⁶ This may be Tharu or Maithili or Bhojpuri.

⁸⁷ Popular made-in-Nepal shoes specially for villagers.

Volunteers

Many volunteers were wearing stained clothes. They looked as if they had not changed their clothes for many days.

Some volunteers said that they had been taken for programmes by force.

Some volunteers were wearing sandals.

Some volunteers were cleaning the guns of guerrillas.

People from distant places, outsiders

One child said that he had walked seven days to reach Beni.

Some volunteers said it took twelve days to arrive in Beni from their district.

All of them appeared to have come from outside of Myagdi district.

They didn't know about the topography of Beni. Some Maoists didn't even know about the location of the Kali Gandaki river.

Role of the local Maoists

Local Maoist leaders including "Pravin" were seen in Beni bazaar.

Local Maoists made plans about where to set up the treatment centres.

Some Maoists were accusing the local Maoists of bad management.

After death

Maoists dug holes to bury bodies beforehand.

They carried bodies as far away as possible from the front line.

Some bodies had their right arm raised as if doing *lāl salām* (red greeting).

Some bodies were covered with red party flags and some were wearing black bands around their heads.

Fearless

They were not afraid to die at all.

Some Maoists fired towards helicopters from the ground.

Behaviour

They drank beer but no hard drinks.

Some Maoists told the people in Beni that they would come back to attack again soon.

When they left Beni, they looked very relaxed as if they were going back home after they had finished some simple business.

4.3.2. In the eyes of ex-Gurkha soldiers

Many retired Gurkha soldiers who served in the Indian or British Armies live in Beni and Mangalaghat. Interestingly, they observed the Maoists in a more professional way. Here I would like to quote some of their impressions about the Maoists and their way of fighting.

A 66-year-old ex-Indian Army soldier who had witnessed the Maoists fighting in Beni:

They were fearless. When one person fell, another fighter picked up his or her gun and fired. Their way of fighting looked like “Kill them, otherwise die”.

A 60-year-old ex-Indian Army soldier in Mangalaghat said:

That was a forced battle. Many people, especially volunteers, seemed to have been brought against their will. The Maoists continued to fight for twelve hours. The muzzle of a gun usually does not stand continuous firing for more than one hour but they were continuously firing for twelve hours. It was like a battle of madmen.

A 45-year-old ex-Indian Army soldier in Beni gave a more analytical impression:

It seemed that they were quite ignorant about the place. I saw them throwing some grenades wrongly towards a private hotel in front of our house. However, the armed Maoists looked well trained. They knew good tactics to finish the enemy's ammunition. They used frequently the tactic of making fake firing sounds and explosions in order to put psychological pressure on the security forces. When a helicopter came flying over Beni, they kept on making explosions for 20 to 30 seconds. Soon after that it left. I heard them shouting “Shoot the RL!” near my house. “RL” must have meant ‘rocket-launcher’. Maoists who came to our house were holding SLRs and INSAS rifles. As far as their weapons went, they were not inferior to the RNA.

5. Possible background and aims of the attack

The Beni attack was clearly the largest ever military action of the Maoists in terms of military force, that is, the number of persons who participated and the force of arms. The Western Division of the People's Liberation Army, consisting of four brigades, including elite troops from their Vishesh Kshetra (Special Region), participated in this action. They used all kinds of modern weapons. According to Third Battalion Commander "Avinash",⁸⁸ for the first time, they made full use of 81-mm mortars. He said they had used only "one or two bullets" before the Beni attack. It was also the longest battle they ever had. They continued to fight for nearly twelve hours. They made the most intense attack upon the army barracks after it got light. The Maoists highlighted the characteristics of the Beni attack in *Maoist Information Bulletin-9*, saying: "The highlights of this massive raid by the valiant PLA fighters was that for the first time in the eight-year-old PW (People's War) the battle was conducted and the district headquarters was occupied in broad daylight till noon". They showed their military ability to defeat the police force and to fight with the Royal Nepalese Army almost equally at least on the ground. On the other hand, the government side showed a lack of seriousness regarding a possible attack on the district headquarters despite the fact that there had been some warning signs of an impending attack since two weeks beforehand.

Beni was, in fact, an ideal target for the Maoists to attack for the following reasons.

1. Geographical reasons: Myagdi adjoins the Maoists' base area, Rukum district, and it can be accessed within several days from there. It takes only five or six hours on foot to reach Beni from the Maoists' supply centre Darwang bazaar. Beni lies in a small valley surrounded by hills. This made it easy for the Maoists to attack, and difficult for the security forces to defend. Furthermore, most of the government offices including the District Police Office and the army barracks stand on one side of the bazaar along the Myagdi river. This location also helped the Maoists.
2. Political reasons: Myagdi district was included in the Vishesh Kshetra (Special Region) that was considered the most affected region of the Maoists. At the same time, the region between the Kali Gandaki river in the east and the Bheri river in the west was declared as the Magarat Autonomous Region in January 2004. Accordingly, to occupy Beni had political and symbolic importance for the Maoists.
3. Publicity reasons: Beni is located close to Pokhara. It takes less than three hours by car to reach Beni from Pokhara. Actually, except Ghorahi in Dang district, Beni was the most easily accessible district headquarters that the Maoists had ever attacked. Hence, many international and national media

⁸⁸ Paudel, Matrika 2004.

personnel went to Beni to cover the incident as soon as the news of the attack had been reported. The scenes of physical casualties published in the various media helped to show the magnitude of the attack.

The Maoists explained the official purpose of the Beni attack in *Maoist Information Bulletin-9*, saying: “Though there has been much speculation on the motive and timing of the military strike in the media, the Party and the PLA have no illusion that it is part of the preparation for the strategic offensive in the protracted PW.”⁸⁹ It was also indicated in the same bulletin that they carried out raids on Beni and Bhojpur in order to show the insecure situation in Nepal and to show the emptiness of the government’s claim that it could hold general elections in the near future. They claimed: “On the political front, two successful centralised military strikes in Bhojpur and Beni within a span of three weeks have given a mortal blow to the royal military dictatorship that was seeking to legitimise its rule through a fake election in the near future.” In this sense they could be said to have achieved their aims to some extent. They also got credibility, especially in international circles, by freeing the POWs they had taken in Beni at their own initiative. However, their physical gains were much less than what they had lost. Despite the fact that they used the biggest ever quantity of ammunition in the Beni attack, the number of weapons and the amount of cash they captured were less than in some of previous actions. To make up for what this attack cost them will take a long time, maybe longer than a year. Their main source of income, that is, forcible donations from business circles and civilians, may become even more intensive. Human casualties on the Maoist side were also the biggest to date. They lost two experienced brigade vice-commanders, a battalion commander, a battalion vice-commander, and some platoon commanders in this action. After the attack, both the government and the Maoist sides claimed a victory, but, in fact, it was a perfect example of how this is a no-win war.

The Maoists were operating their “special people’s military campaign” in western Nepal until 2 June 2004⁹⁰ with the purpose of encouraging “the armed rebellion by the general public” and “centralized military actions”. To achieve these purposes the Maoists were abducting civilians in large numbers. Various media frequently report the mass abduction of students and teachers from schools in remote villages. When I visited the western part of Myagdi district in May 2004, Maoists were operating the “one help from each household (*ek ghar ek sahayog*) campaign”. This was a campaign to help the Maoists’ people’s army by any means. The villagers in Darwang VDC explained the actual result of this campaign, saying: “Those who have money have to give them cash, those who have food have to give them rice,

⁸⁹ In the central committee meeting held in Thawang of Rolpa district in August 2004, the CPN (Maoist) decided to enter the stage of the strategic offensive.

⁹⁰ It was later extended for some months.

those who have clothes have to give them clothes, and those who have nothing have to give them one member of their family.” This shows very clearly that it is the poorest who have to pay the most. That is the reality of the Maoists’ People’s War.

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