

# Guardian For The Guards

After Years of Protecting Others,  
Gurkhas Ask: Who's Looking After Us?

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POKHARA, Nepal—To the list of Nepal's woes, including a royal massacre and a Maoist uprising, add this one: restless Gurkhas.

Gurkhas are the storied Nepalese mercenaries who have fought for the British for nearly 200 years. They are feared around the world, partly because the British spread the story that Gurkhas couldn't draw their trademark curved knives, *kukri*, without drawing blood, preferably by severing a head.

Gurkhas fought in the British empire's Indian Mutiny, two of three Afghan Wars, both world wars, and more recently, Kosovo. In 1910 they guarded the body of King Edward VII as he lay in state. Today, Gurkhas serve as occasional orderlies to Queen Elizabeth II, and retired Gurkhas protect the leaders of Singapore and Brunei.

But back home, some Gurkhas are turning into a headache for their own government. Their complaints underscore the pressures on Nepal's 10-year-old democracy: It isn't just that the country is remote, feudalistic and poor; the Nepalese increasingly expect the government to work for them.

Consider Capt. Man Bahadur Gurung, the deputy mayor of the lake-dotted, backpacker haven of Pokhara. He served 31 years for the British, fighting communism in 1950s and 1960s in what is now Malaysia and Indonesia.

Today, he's a communist himself. Standing in his office, he points to a portrait of the general secretary of the United Marxist-Leninists, Nepal's main

opposition party. “Some people say Karl Marx is still alive and lives in Nepal. This man is Karl Marx,” he says approvingly.

One of Capt. Gurung’s causes is a group called Gurkha Army Ex-Servicemen’s Organization, or Gaeso, a sort of leftist labor union and ground zero for Gurkhas who are unhappy with British treatment and the Nepal government’s response. Gaeso recently filed a case with the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, claiming Gurkhas are subject to racial discrimination by the U.K. because their pensions are lower than those of British army regulars.

Gaeso’s Pokhara headquarters, near a major British recruitment camp, is plastered with big blue-and-white signboards: “Equal Danger, Equal Reward,” says one. Across the street at Gaeso’s women’s auxiliary, the oddly named Gurkha Army Ex-Woman Organization, a sign says, “We Fought 200 Years for British Sovereignty, In Return We Got Pain, Nothing More.”

The group’s willingness to pressure the U.K. is nettlesome for Nepal. Gurkha paychecks bring in valuable foreign currency. “If you press too hard, the British will decide to get rid of these troublemakers,” worries Dipak Gurung, leader of a rival Gurkha group with similar objectives but which dislikes Gaeso’s confrontational style.

Inside Gaeso headquarters, a half-dozen vets grumble. One man, wearing a colorful Nepalese cap and blue plastic flip-flops, says that after fighting for eight years in the 1960s, he now lives on 3,000 Nepalese rupees a month he earns running errands for Gaeso. “I fought for the British,” he says, summarizing his plight. “No welfare, no pension.”

Gurkhas take their name from the village of Gorkha, where a Nepalese prince first allowed the British to recruit his subjects in the 1800s. The British East India Co. had just defeated Nepal in a war, but

admired their foes. The Nepalese were strong and loyal, and according to a 100-year-old recruitment handbook, they even ate faster than Indian recruits, shunning elaborate Hindu mealtime rituals.

Today the British still employ about 3,800 Gurkhas, partly because it's becoming harder to recruit at home. About a year ago, the U.K. boosted Gurkha pay by as much as 183%, bringing it in line with the British soldiers' pay. Pensions remain lower, but most Gurkhas are discharged after only 15 years, leaving time for a second career, British officials say.

The British also provide health care in Nepalese villages, run a charity that helps vets who are unable to work, build village schools and carve cliffside trails to vets' homes. Gurkhas come mostly from a few ethnic minorities in the mountains (which is why so many are named Gurung).

A few decades ago vets were satisfied with moving back to villages after serving mostly in Southeast Asia, which was then undeveloped like Nepal. But in today's post-colonial world, most serve in the U.K.—and village life pales in comparison. "We're living in this IT age. I've seen the world," says Vishnu Gurung, a 45-year-old ex-serviceman who returned a year ago. He came from a mountain hamlet, but since then he has lived in the U.K. and Hong Kong. "We don't want to go back where we started."

Instead, many go to Pokhara. Three decades ago it was a buffalo grazing ground; today it's a Gurkha boomtown. Modern stone bungalows are sprouting by the hundreds. Pokhara recently went from zero to four FM stations in three months.

Some Gurkhas go into business. Vishnu Gurung, the recent returnee, owns a lakeside restaurant, Fewa Park, catering to trekkers heading for the snowcapped Annapurnas that tower over this town of 100,000. Nearby is the Gurkha Lodge, the Hotel Gorkha, the Gurkha Heaven Hotel, and My Gurkha's Restaurant.

But ex-soldiers making second careers in Nepal are the exception. Poverty may make Nepal a cheap place to live, but it also makes finding a suitable job difficult. When 80% of the population gets its livelihood from subsistence farming, professional jobs are almost non-existent.

So, specialized Gurkha employment agencies mainly offer more jobs abroad. At one agency, a map on the wall has pins showing some options: land-mine clearance in Mozambique; bank security in the Solomon Islands. The ex-soldiers work overseas, and their families stay behind, where many fall prey to modern problems creeping into Nepal: children who take drugs, scam artists who trick unsuspecting wives to invest the family savings in pyramid schemes.

Gurkha frustrations were given an outlet a decade ago when Nepal's then-king (the one recently massacred) instituted full democracy, allowing social activism and press freedoms. A publication called "Gurkha Soldier Voice" heralded the arrival of Gaeso, which took a leftist slant. Three years ago, it started getting support from the World Federation of Democratic Youth, a group that used to be known as a Soviet Front (officials still call each other "comrade.")

Gaeso representative Yam Bahadur Gurung insists the group has nothing to do with politics. "This is a human-rights issue," he says.

But Pokhara's deputy mayor Man Bahadur Gurung, a Gaeso adviser, freely says he's drawn to communism as a remedy for government corruption and ineffectiveness. "The morale of the public is very low," he says, "and it's only made worse by the recent royal massacre." He asks: If the government can't protect the king, how can it protect anyone else?

The deputy mayor isn't a Maoist, an illegal guerrilla group that has killed more than 1,000 Nepalese. But the Maoists are coming. In recent months they've bombed a few government banks

within Pokhara, bringing their campaign against unfair lending and corruption out of the hills and into town. They already rule some rural areas, where their farmer's-rights movement resonates.

There are suggestions, too, that a small number of Gurkhas or their families may be helping them. Some former Gurkhas who served in the Indian army have joined the Maoists as fighters, human-rights and military experts say.

Along Pokhara's lakefront, support for Maoists' violent tactics is nil. Restaurateur Vishnu Gurung looks around his empty eatery—tourists fled after the royal slaughter—and says, “Political turmoil is bad for business.”

But Maoist aims are another matter. Hom Gurung, another ex-Gurkha who owns a nearby pub, took notice when Maoists recently called for a 50% cut in private-school fees. That touches a sore point with Gurkhas, who spend lots of their income on education.

He recognizes it as a Maoist marketing ploy. “The Maoists are very smart,” Mr. Gurung says. But what that means is, “the basic things they say, many Nepalese want.”

*—Staff reporter Daniel Pearl in Bombay  
contributed to this article.*