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Putting the record straight

UN support to the Verified Minors and Late Recruits from the Maoist cantonments

- *Robert Piper*



In light of the recent disruptions caused by a small minority of ex-Maoist army combatants already discharged from the cantonments, it could be useful to set the record straight on what has happened since early 2010 when the Maoist leadership agreed to discharge this first group.

With the signing of the Agreement on the Monitoring of the Management of Arms and Armies (AMMAA) in November 2006, the Government, the Seven Party Alliance and the Maoist party agreed on the criteria for establishing who should and should not remain in the cantonments. Individuals were deemed ineligible for any future integration or rehabilitation programmes on the basis of either (a) having been under the age of 18 years when the ceasefire agreement was signed in May 2006, and thus having been recruited to the Maoist army contrary to international law, or (b) having joined the Maoist army after the ceasefire was signed. Hence these individuals have been called Verified Minors and Late Recruits or 'VMLR' for short. UNMIN was responsible for verifying which individuals fell into which category — a complex task particularly given that few of those eventually deemed a VMLR offered this information willingly. Final approval of the verification list was provided by the Joint Monitoring and Coordination Committee made up by the Nepal Army and the Maoist army under the chairmanship of UNMIN.

After several years of unsuccessful advocacy, a discharge plan was finally signed in mid-December 2009. At the request of the Government, the UN coordinated the discharge process of these 4,008 VMLRs from the Maoist army cantonments in early 2010 and a team of UN staff were deployed to the cantonments within two weeks, with the first discharge ceremony taking place on 7 Jan 2010. Of the 4,008, only 2,400 were physically present in the cantonments and interviewed in person by the UN. Some 1,614 were not present and may have left weeks, months or even years earlier. The Maoist party technically discharged this second group of 'no-shows' through a signing ceremony on 23 March 2010.

The Government also asked the UN Country Team to provide support for the transition of these VMLRs from military to civilian life. The then Government insisted that packages for this group of VMLRs should not exceed around Rs 100,000 in value which corresponded to the ceiling of support provided to the families of the victims of the conflict at that time. In response to UN advocacy, the Government quickly agreed to add additional benefits, in particular to cover three meals a day to those in training. The UN, based on lessons from similar programmes around the world, felt that this package was the minimum necessary to facilitate a successful transition.

The UN Interagency Rehabilitation Programme (UNIRP) was thus established in early 2010 to provide these transition services to the VMLRs. The expertise of UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, and the ILO were pooled to manage this complex programme. In parallel, a UNICEF and OHCHR team was deployed to monitor compliance with the Discharge Plan, with which the Maoist party must comply in order to be delisted from the UN Security Council's list of groups that recruit and use child soldiers; the Party is not yet delisted.

The UN established five regional offices where discharged VMLRs were offered one of four rehabilitation choices: (i) vocational skills training from a menu of 35 options; (ii) training and start-up capital for a micro-enterprise; (iii) education (i.e., returning to school); or (iv) health-sector training. These services have been delivered by a network of institutions throughout the country and individuals have received a monthly cash stipend while in training. Beyond the financial ceiling set by the Government, rehabilitation services have been complemented by counselling services to all, health and psychosocial support to those who need it, as well as follow-up career counselling, job placement support and life-skills training. Special attention is paid to the needs of the 35 percent of participants who are women, with pregnant women and lactating mothers receiving additional nutritional support and monthly childcare grants. Support for child caregivers and maternity allowances have also been provided. The programme has also worked closely with the private sector to link graduates with employment and microcredit opportunities. All of these additional direct benefits and services to the VMLRs have increased the value of the training packages by almost as much again, as the direct assistance to the individuals. This is money well spent in our view — supporting someone during such a complicated personal and professional transition requires more than a training course and a pat on the back.

Some 18 months later, the results of the programme speak for themselves. Of those present during the discharge ceremonies, 80 percent signed up for one of the rehabilitation options. We were also able to make contact with some of the 1,614 VMLRs who were not present at the discharge ceremonies (the 'no shows') and 450 of them enrolled in the programme as well. Of the approximately 1,000 graduates to date, 60 percent have been offered work or are running their own business. Another 1,000 individuals are still undergoing training and education. The programme closed for new enrolments in July 2011.

Given the overall economic environment in Nepal, a 60 percent job rate so far is a decent outcome, and we are still working with the remainder to find opportunities for them. Our graduates are employed in a wide range of activities including setting up restaurants, mobile phone repair centres, tailoring shops, beauty parlours, photo studios, and working as telecommunications technicians, cooks, welders or motorcycle mechanics. Their transition to a civilian life is generally going well.

Equally as important as the services provided to these individuals, are the services provided by the programme to the communities to which they returned, to smooth their re-entry into civilian life. The UN brought together VMLRs and youth from each community for a wide range of peacebuilding activities including sports events, cultural programmes, tours and picnics. In the Education option, the programme even provides an education scholarship to one vulnerable child from the community for every two VMLRs enrolled into school along with additional support to the school.

Nevertheless, expectation-management has been the greatest challenge for this programme from day one. From the outset we were aware that for many, this would be seen as a 'compromise'. Some had

been informed by their Commanders only a matter of weeks before the discharge ceremonies took place that they had been verified as a VMLR by the UNMIN-lead verification process. A few expressed their disappointment very directly to the UN, a small minority violently. Yet most were highly motivated, competent young people. The vast majority of those that entered the programme have seized the chance and turned it into an opportunity. I have met many of them personally who are setting a great example for young people throughout the country.

We also anticipated expectation-management would resurface as a problem, if the final negotiations around the remaining 19,000 were heavily cash-focused. This might have been avoided if the discharge of these VMLRs had been done several years earlier as anticipated in the peace agreements and the dust had been allowed to settle. But memories are still fresh and ties between those inside and outside the cantonments remain. And the packages negotiated for the 19,000 still inside the cantonments, are of a different order of magnitude than that which was provided to the VMLRs. The terms of this negotiation were going to be different from the start; but this argument isn't easily accepted by the VMLRs for obvious reasons.

For its part, the UNIRP programme is not over, with over 1,000 individuals still in training programmes and efforts still underway to match more graduates with jobs. Tensions around the process of finally closing the cantonments are inevitable perhaps and will need to be managed with care. For our part, the UN stands behind the assistance we have provided to those already discharged, as a success by a number of measures. We have done our utmost to support successive Governments deal with this difficult aspect of the peace process and will continue to work for a successful transition of this group, who need and deserve our support.

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