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PHOTO: ZUZANA SADKOVA

A billboard advertisement for the Himalaya Times newspaper acts as a reminder of the days before the February 1st coup

“Democracy Day” in Nepal’s Dictatorship

By Mark West

KATHMANDU, Nepal — Near the traditional speech forum just north of Ratna Park in the city center, the silence was unnerving. At noon, during the peak of the government’s National Democracy Day ceremonies, thousands walked briskly along the streets toward New Road on this holiday from work and school. The only sounds were the quiet footfalls of the hurried pedestrians. Passing by long lines of soldiers and police, any citizen who paused near the empty speech forum was told firmly to keep walking.

This weekend the new Nepalese government celebrated Democracy Day by cutting all phone lines, putting hundreds more rights activists and political leaders in preventive detention, and serving warrants

for—among others—the editor and publisher of the Himalayan Times newspaper. In Kathmandu, all traffic in the center was banned, and tens of thousands of citizens were barred from attending the sparse holiday celebrations on Ratna’s expansive fields, the city’s equivalent of Central Park.

The normal cacophony of sounds was conspicuously missing, as the population’s movements were dictated by thousands of security personnel armed with machine guns and batons, keeping watch on foot and horseback, and keeping ready in paddy wagons and camouflage jeeps. In Ratna Park, King Gyanendra and the Unified Command generals watched from their rostrum as a parade of representatives of the army and various civic groups filed by. A standing crowd of several hundred watched from a roped viewing area inside the park.

When approached and asked whether people could attend the ceremony, a soldier replied: “No, permit only.” Stray passers by were ushered across the street toward Bag Bazaar, where the sidewalk was packed with countless pedestrians. Attempting to move both north and south, they were wedged between a long wall and a line of soldiers. Told to keep moving, the resourceful Nepalese managed to defy the laws of physics.

Back at the speech forum, groups of normally gregarious and talkative schoolchildren moved orderly and silently toward New Road, fresh from marching in their navy blue uniforms for the King and the generals. A pair of middle-aged men walked absentmindedly toward a park bench. When they took a single step into the grassy forum area they were turned back by a soldier with a rifle.

An old beggar, sitting legless on the sidewalk leading from the forum back to Bag Bazaar, was told by a policeman to get up and leave. Slowly, in the city silence, the white-haired man stretched a sock over each stump. As he reached for one of his two prosthetic limbs, the policeman returned to the still-seated beggar. He leaned over the old man, took out his whistle and blew.

That same morning the findings of the advocacy group Amnesty International were released. Secretary General Irene Khan, completing a week’s investigation in Nepal, reported: “The longstanding conflict between the Maoist and the security forces has destroyed human rights in the countryside. Now, the state of emergency is affecting human rights in the urban areas, taking the country to the brink of disaster. Time is running out—Nepal is on a downward spiral.”