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Nepal Releases Thousands of Former Fighters as Part of Peace Deal

By KIRAN CHAPAGAIN

KATMANDU, Nepal — Nepal achieved an important step in the country's peace process on Friday as the government began releasing more than 7,000 former Maoist fighters from encampments where they have lived under guard for the past six years.

Nepal ended a bloody 10-year guerrilla war in 2006 when Maoist rebels signed a peace accord with the government and agreed to lay down their arms. Maoist leaders formed a political party, but more than 19,000 Maoist fighters were placed inside encampments initially monitored by the United Nations.

The fate of those Maoist fighters has been a key sticking point in Nepal's still incomplete peace process. Political parties have continued jousting over the shape of a new constitution, even as the government, at times, has teetered near collapse. Last August, a Maoist leader, Baburam Bhattarai, became prime minister and has since helped revive the stalled peace process.

Friday marked the beginning of a 12-day period in which 7,365 former Maoist fighters of the People's Liberation Army will be released from different encampments across the country and returned to society, each provided with a check ranging from \$6,357 to as much as \$10,235.

"It is an emotional moment," said Ram Lal Roka, a vice commander at the Dahaban cantonment in the Rolpa district. "I am returning to my society, ending 16 years of service in the P.L.A.," he said.

Mr. Roka expressed sadness, despite his release, that the ultimate goals of the Maoists to transform Nepal into a Communist state had not been achieved. He said he was returning to society "without achieving any of the ideal."

He added: "I do not have an answer if I am asked why I joined the P.L.A. I'm confused what I should tell people when I return."

Roughly 9,000 former Maoist fighters remain in the encampments, waiting to be integrated into Nepal's army and other security forces, as part of the 2006 peace agreement. But blending them into the military — in some cases, joining with soldiers they once fought against — has proved a very difficult political step.

Jim Yardley contributed reporting from New Delhi.