

Asia's forgotten wars mark 2004

By Shaun Tandon

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AS Iraq grabbed world headlines, thousands died in obscurity across Asia in 2003 as Indonesia and the Philippines battled rebels, communists rampaged through India and Nepal, and Bhutan launched its first military operation in nearly 140 years.

Dozens of Asian insurgencies, many of them decades-old, seem destined to rage through 2004 as resolving them remains far from the new year's to-do lists of global powers. In India's northeastern hills between Tibet and Myanmar, about 30 rebel groups remain up in arms for the causes of ethnicities whose names draw blank stares in the capital New Delhi more than 2,000 kilometres away. Ceasefires came and went in Aceh on the tip of the Indonesian island of Sumatra and in the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal, with troops in both countries vowing by year-end to crush guerrillas.

In Nepal, the army has reported the deaths of around 1,100 Maoist rebels and close to 300 soldiers or police since peace talks broke down in August. Similar figures are reported in Aceh, where the military says 1,200 rebels have been killed since a five-month truce collapsed in May and Indonesia

imposed martial law.

It says some 300 civilians have also been killed but blames the deaths on the Free Aceh Movement, which has been fighting for independence since 1976.

Elsewhere in Indonesia, a total of 6,000 people have died since 1999 in Muslim-Christian battles in two areas: the eastern Maluku islands and Poso in the South Sulawesi province.

Analysts said such bloodshed goes ignored by the outside world because vital resources are rarely at stake and the conflicts are seen as purely internal, with no international dimension save the occasional allegation that rebels are skipping an unfenced border. Armed insurgents are active in 14 of India's 28 states. But the foremost issue for New Delhi policymakers is Kashmir where Muslim rebels are fighting to join India's historic rival Pakistan.

"The rest (of India's insurgent groups) are just disparate movements seeking to secede," said Bharat Kharnad, a research professor at the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi. But it is the local nature of the insurrections that makes them so difficult to quell. Throughout Asia, guerrillas armed with looted or smuggled weapons have exploited ethnic, religious and caste differences to survive onslaughts by militaries equipped with the latest hardware.

Kathmandu authorities have little control over vast stretches of Nepal where the Maoists, claiming to fight on behalf of the

poor and ethnically excluded, levy their own "taxes" and even run their own "people's courts." In the largely Roman Catholic Philippines, the military has accused the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) of sheltering extremists at its camps in the south of the archipelago. But the quarter-century Muslim separatist conflict showed signs of inching towards resolution in July when MILF entered a ceasefire.

Despite sporadic clashes under the truce, the 11,900-strong rebel group is slated to start peace talks with Manila next year. Philippine military chief General Narciso Abaya said in October that the truce with the Muslim separatists would free up his forces to be redeployed against communists fighting their own decades-long insurrection. But at year-end, a spokesman for President Gloria Arroyo said the Philippine government was seeking to reopen dialogue with the communist guerrillas. Peace moves also picked up steam in Nagaland, a northeastern Indian state smaller than Kuwait where at least 25,000 people have died since 1947.

Naga leaders Thuingaleng Muivah and Isak Chishi Swu made their first trip to New Delhi in 36 years in January 2003 for negotiations with the Indian leadership. Elsewhere in the northeast, Bhutan in December made good on six years of threats against Indian separatists holed up in the kingdom, launching the Buddhist kingdom's first military campaign since an 1865 war with the British. —AFP