

Moving documentary of women on the frontline

★★★★

SARI SOLDIERS (Nepal/US).
2008 At the TriContinental Film Festival, at Cinema Nouveau, V & A Waterfront. Review: **NATHALIE ROSA BUCHER**

THOUGH less frequently responsible for starting wars, from Eritrea to Zimbabwe, Joan of Arc to *GI Jane* and Muammar Gaddafi's infamous, 200-strong Amazonian Guard, women have been part of military history and combat for thousands of years.

The small state of Nepal is mostly known for its magnificent mountain peaks that attract travellers aiming to conquer the world's highest summits and those who seek enlightenment beyond thin air, favouring a variety of (illicit) substances.

Between 1996 and 2008, the Maoist Nepalese Liberation Army (NLA) and the Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) were embroiled in a dirty guerrilla war that saw the "disappearances" of civilians, Latin American style.

By 2005, Nepal had the largest number of reported disappearances in the world. In response to the increasing number of women in the Maoist army, the RNA also started recruiting and training more women.

Sari Soldiers, a deeply moving and wonderfully crafted documentary, directed by Julie Bridgham, tells the story of six women, urban and rural, military and civilian, activists and village leaders, Dalit (lowest caste) and Brahmin (highest caste) and their positions and experiences during the conflict.

The 92-minute film, which screens at this year's TriContinental Film Festival has received a number of well-deserved awards, including the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival 2008 Nestor Almendros Prize.

Bridgham follows the trajectories of the women's stories, but the case of Devi Sunuwar, a Dalit woman whose 14-year old daughter Maina was abducted, drives the narrative. The film also focuses on Royal Nepal Army Officer Rajani and Krishna, a monarchist from a ru-



HARDY: Determined Maoist fighters are in the frontline in *Sari Soldiers*, which will be screened at the TriContinental Film Festival on Sunday and on September 24.

ral community who leads a rebellion against the Maoists.

Over three years, Sunuwar tries to establish the whereabouts of her daughter, assisted by a brave human rights lawyer, Mandira Sharma. "I'm determined to bring those responsible to justice," states a defiant Sunuwar, who puts her and her family's life at risk to find out the truth. In the end, Sunuwar rises above her caste and grief and her daughter's case inspires many other families to seek justice.

While peace has returned to the country today, by 2005, Sharma confirms there were neither rule of law nor a democratic space in the mountain kingdom.

Disappearances and extrajudicial killings had become the order of the day and levels of fear were intensifying on all sides of the conflict, which according to Sharma had less to do with (Maoist) ideology than caste-based discrimination and military aid to Nepal, which fuelled the conflict.

The power of the film lies in its attention to detail, its closeness to the subjects that lay bare the grace and humanity of each woman.

In a scene at the beginning of the film, two female soldiers are seen pasting camouflage paint onto their faces in almost delicate gestures.

Kranti, a Maoist commander, is seen eating with her right hand and gripping her AK-47 with her left.

She wears camouflage and fights, believing that her actions will assure the breaking down of an old society and enable a new one in its place.

"We have no people's representation or parliament right now," laments student activist Ram Kumar.

Convinced that taking over the streets would decide the future of the country, she and her comrades faced the brutality of the baton-wielding and gun-toting police in the capital Kathmandu again and again.

The signing of a peace treaty in 2008, eventually paved the way to the reopening of parliament, the establishment of the constituent assembly and even abolition of monarchy, a 240-year old institution.

The inspiring stories of the six women, inextricably interwoven with the history of their country, open a unique window on a country and society we hear little about. They also remind us of the significance of civil courage and the presence of justice.

● *Sari Soldiers* screens at the TriContinental Film Festival on Sunday at 6.15pm and on September 24 at 6.30pm. Tickets are R30. See www.3continentsfestival.co.za

