

Nothing India's done yet will curb Naxalism

SUHAS CHAKMA

As Chhattisgarh goes to the polls soon, the Congress has decided to make the May 26 attack on its leaders a poll issue against the BJP. This is, however, unlikely to help combat the Maoists.

The turf wars between the Central and Chhattisgarh governments and the two national political parties i.e. Congress and BJP are reminiscent of the turf wars between Maoist groups prior to September 2004 when the Peoples War Group, Peoples War, the Maoists Communist Centre etc were engaged in fratricidal killings. Once the various factions of the Maoists became united under the Communist Party of India (Maoists), there has not been any looking back for them. The massive inflow of extractive industries in areas listed under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution following economic liberalisation, and oppression by the forest officials, provided the classical conditions where Maoist ideology met the struggle of the Adivasis against exploitation and denial of entitlements.

By the time Bastar MLA Mahendra Karma found it difficult to campaign in his constituency without the approval of the Maoists, the Maoists had already won over the Adivasis in Central India. The Centre supported civilian defence against the Maoists in Chhattisgarh in light of the then-ongoing experience in Jammu and Kashmir where in thousands of Kashmiris were armed under the garb of Village



Defence Committees to protect against militant attacks. Mahendra Karma, instead of following the example of J&K, started the Salwa Judum campaign under which thousands of Adivasis were forcibly shifted to relief camps. Their abandoned villages became liberated zones for the Maoists. This strategy of forcibly moving people into strategic hamlets with the aim to disconnect the guerillas from the civilians was used by the British against communist insurgents in the 1950s in Malaya (now Malaysia) and by the Americans during the Vietnam war. It failed both times. Opposition leader Karma and chief minister Raman Singh further recruited adivasi children as special police officers and laid the seeds for a civil war. The unprecedented violence brought the Naxals onto centre-stage.

As the Maoists became the biggest internal security threat, then Home Minister P. Chidambaram launched a two-prong strategy. First, the Centre launched Operation Green Hunt, but this was bound to fail without concurrence from the states. Further, a nation-state has the right and duty to take legitimate security measures within the limits of the rule of law. The government

exceeded these limits by targeting civil society actors who questioned human rights violations. Chidambaram, however, justified payments made by industries to the Maoists by stating in July 2010 that "unless the state is able to provide them better security, they will have to pay these rents to protect their investments". It is another matter that mining companies have also been providing ammonium nitrate, gelatin, detonators etc to the Maoists. The massacre of 76 CRPF personnel on April 7, 2010 in Dantewada essentially brought an end to Operation Green Hunt. Second, Chidambaram launched the Integrated Action Plan for development of Left Wing Extremist (LWE) affected districts and provided ₹25 crore and ₹30 crore per district during the year 2010-11 and 2011-12 respectively. This initiative too was bound to fail as the Centre and state governments could not implement the Tribal Sub-Plan in these areas since 1972. As district magistrates currently seldom venture out of their offices, these funds are essentially being misused.

The anti-Naxal programme has been reduced to a mockery. Districts are eager to be declared LWE affected. The Assam Police, for example, has been working overtime to declare certain districts as LWE affected to get a share of the booty.

Since the end of romanticism with Left-wing armed movements in 1970s, the world has seen violent communist movement only in five countries: Sendero Luminoso in Peru, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) and the Naxals in India. All these communist groups with the exception of FARC have one common feature: the leaders are non-indigenous while the support base has been mainly indigenous peoples.

While the Maoists came to power in Nepal, Philippines has had the most success in battling the insurgents. It did this by granting autonomy to the indigenous peoples in the Cordillera region while the indigenous people of other regions were covered under the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act in 1997. The CPP never made inroads into Mindanao. The experiences of Peru and Colombia are of little relevance to India.

The Maoists in India can no longer be dealt with by leaders of Panchayats under the Panchayati Raj Extension Act or by giving rights over minor forest produce under the Forest Rights Act. Nor will the experience of Punjab, where insurgents had no jungle to flee to, be applicable. The Northeast has repeatedly shown that in the last 60 years no insurgency in the tropical areas could be eliminated.

To counter the Naxals, the adivasis in the Fifth Schedule Areas needs to be given the power to govern themselves in the form of the Autonomous District Councils, which shall further provide the opportunity for development of Adivasi leadership. The Maoist leaders are non-Adivasis. They allow extractive industries to operate so long the industries pay them, even if it is to the detriment of the Adivasis, and any Adivasi who opposes the Naxals is killed. Empowering Adivasis must be the central focus of any strategy to tackle Naxals.

The author is director of the Asian Centre for Human Rights