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Face of Salwa Judum killed in Maoist ambush in Chhattisgarh

by Aman Sethi



Special Arrangement: Kartam Surya was one of three informal SPO commanders to emerge in the aftermath of the Salwa Judum.

On Thursday evening, cadres of the outlawed Communist Party of India (Maoist) opened fire on a Mahindra Scorpio vehicle in Chhattisgarh's troubled Sukma district and killed Kartam Surya, a 29-year-old police constable, absconder from the law and alleged rapist, who had come to symbolise the excesses of the State's counter-insurgency campaign.

Described as the "Scourge of the Maoists" by obituaries in local newspapers, Mr. Surya began his career in law enforcement as Special Police Officer [SPO] during the Salwa Judum and rapidly grew to head the "Surya Group": a band of approximately 100 SPOs who were dubbed 'Koya Commandos' and operated under dubious legal cover as the vanguard of the State police's counter-insurgency effort.

Mr. Surya was one of three informal SPO commanders to emerge in the aftermath of the Judum. [In January last year, Ismail Khan, head of the Ismail group, was fatally shot at point blank range by a Maoist guerilla as he watched a rooster fight in Sukma town](#), while Kicche Nanda, of the

Nanda group, was injured in the Thursday ambush that claimed Mr. Surya. CRPF officers and policemen who operated alongside the three men described them as brave and committed soldiers.

Since its inception in 2005, the controversial Salwa Judum has been described as either a spontaneous peaceful tribal upsurge against the Maoists, or a violent government backed vigilante force. Thousands of young men were designated SPOs under provisions of the Chhattisgarh Police Act and pushed into anti-Maoist operations. Petitions filed in the Supreme Court accuse Judum members and SPOs of over 500 murders, 99 rapes and 103 acts of arson.

Villagers and local journalists in Sukma said that Mr. Surya was intimately involved in the Salva Judum and could have been responsible for at least some of the incidents listed in the petitions, but was never held accountable as he wielded tremendous influence amongst the SPOs and was an accomplished trooper. An article in the *Indian Express* for instance, described Mr. Surya as the ‘mentor and first leader of SPOs’.

Charged with rape

In 2009, Mr. Surya and ‘SPO Commander’ Kicche Nanda, were accused of raping three tribal women, aged between 19 and 23, in Sam Setti village in the summer of 2006 and charged with rape, criminal intimidation and wrongful confinement.

On November 17 2009, a sessions court issued warrants against Mr. Surya and his cohorts, but the counsel for the State said the police were unable to track down the accused, even as both men continued to participate in police raids and search operations. The following day, on November 18 2009, Mr. Surya and Mr. Nanda were declared absconders.

In April 2011, villagers from the villages of Tarmetla, Timapuram and Morepalli accused the Koya Commandos of raping three women, killing three men and burning close to 300 homes and granaries in the course of a five day operation. It is unclear if Mr. Surya participated in the operation, but policemen and local journalists have confirmed that he was present when a mob of former and serving SPOs attacked a convoy carrying emergency rations to the affected villages.

In July 2011, the Supreme Court took cognizance of the multiple accounts of rape, murder, and arson levelled against Chhattisgarh’s SPOs and ruled that the use of SPOs like Mr. Surya in anti-Maoist operations was unconstitutional. The Chhattisgarh government responded by inducting Mr. Surya as a constable in the State police force and incorporating his men into a newly created Chhattisgarh Auxiliary Armed Police Force. The men continued to report to Mr. Surya, making him one of the few police constables in the country to command a company-sized force of armed men.

The Chhattisgarh police deny the formal existence of a “Surya group” and maintain that SPOs do not head operations and work under the supervision of senior policemen. Senior officers have maintained that any such ‘groups’ could be a remnant from the days of the Judum when SPOs organised themselves on the basis of village affiliations.

At the time of press, the Chhattisgarh police was unable to offer any information on the 2009 warrant pending against Mr. Surya, despite this correspondent mailing them copies of the court order. A police spokesperson was unable to state if Mr. Surya had in fact appeared before court and received bail, or if he had continued to participate in police operations two years after being declared an “absconder” in a court of law.

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