

We Fight for the People, and Our Only Partners are the Oppressed: Maoist Leader Koteswar Rao

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Kolkata: A Maoist leader says the rebels are ready for “a protracted war” in Lalgarh, the area in West Bengal’s West Midnapore district that security forces are trying to free from the control of tribals and Maoists.



Defiant stance, a May picture of Koteswar Rao, who says the stand-off between the Maoists and the government won't end until police atrocities stop and the administration builds infrastructure at Lalgarh.

Indranil Bhounik

“Tell *Buddhababu*, his forces should fight us—the guerrillas—and not the tribals,” said Koteswar Rao, who heads guerrilla operations of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) in West Bengal. *Buddhababu* is a reference to West Bengal chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee.

Seven months ago, tribals of Lalgarh, backed by Maoist guerrillas, seized control of the area in protest against alleged police atrocities. The administration last week deployed state and central forces to flush out the guerrillas, and has since regained control of the Lalgarh police station.

Rao, who claims to have amassed a huge cache of arms and ammunition, wants a dialogue with the state government, but the administration has ruled out any negotiations with the radical group or the tribals. “Our aim is to free the locals of Lalgarh, who are living under the terror of the Maoists,” said Raj Kanojia, inspector general of police (law and order).

‘Let them send another 500 companies (of police)... This protracted war is not going to end soon.’
“The tribals are a pawn in the game...they are being used by the Maoists as a human shield. We are trying to flush out the Maoists, who have come from other states such as Andhra Pradesh and Orissa.”

In a telephone interview from Lalgarh, Rao denied that the Maoists were shooting from tribal shoulders. “They support us, and the support is entirely voluntary,” he said. Edited excerpts:

How long can you hold out? The state is mobilizing more forces...

Let them send another 500 companies (of police). We are ready. This protracted war is not going to end soon. And we have prepared for it with full understanding of the strength of our opponents. We have enough resources...but more importantly, we have the support of the locals, and the whole area is surrounded by them. Tell *Buddhababu*, his forces should fight us—the guerrillas—and not the tribals. **So you agree that you are using the tribals as human shields...**

We have never used the tribals as human shields. They are with us voluntarily...and some of them are even leading our forces. Come to Lalgarh, and you wouldn’t take long to understand that they support us, and the support is entirely voluntary.

A lot of civilians might die in the crossfire. Wouldn’t you be morally responsible for those killed?

In a war, there are no civilians—there are people either on your side or against you. And moral responsibility?

The Centre and the state should be held responsible for the bloodshed. We have repeatedly appealed to them to withdraw the forces and initiate a dialogue, but they ignored (the appeal). So, let them face the consequences. But yes, I’ll be hurt if the locals died in this war.

If the state government eventually agreed to your proposal for a dialogue, would you come?

If the government agrees to discussion or debate, the people of Lalgarh will take part. The government will have to sit with the civilians and their representatives to understand what they want.

You have been saying that Mamata Banerjee (Union rail minister and leader of the Trinamool Congress, West Bengal’s main opposition party) should pressure the government to withdraw central forces from Lalgarh. Are you expecting her to bail you out? Has your party joined forces with the Trinamool?

Let me tell you that the Trinamool Congress was never with us. We were in Singur and in Nandigram on our own and we had gone there to help the locals. We fight for the people, and our only partners are the people who face oppression. The Maoists consider oppressors as their worst enemy, and the tribals of Lalgarh have been facing oppression by the CPM (the Communist Party of India-Marxist) and the state administration for decades.

What is your message for the state government?

We are ready for a protracted war. We will not stop until police atrocities end and the government starts building infrastructure in Lalgarh...

Tell *Buddhababu*, he is playing into the hands of the Centre. He should stop playing along or else he will suffer a lot. He already has. And if he is adamant about fighting this war, he should fight us, and not the tribals.

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