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Action on Maoist ‘helpers’ - Crackdown in Calcutta after Mamata warns govt

A STAFF REPORTER

Calcutta, Oct. 5 [2009]: Police today arrested two “Maoist sympathisers” from Calcutta for collecting money to help the Lalgarh movement, enforcing a government threat to pin down financial sources through the first such crackdown in the city in recent memory.

The arrests came on a day Mamata Banerjee warned the government that “Bengal will burn” if it moved against writers such as Mahasweta Devi and artistes who are sympathetic to the Lalgarh movement. The government retorted that nobody was above the law and it could not differentiate between “less-known” and “well-known” persons.

The two arrested today — Prasun Chatterjee, 34, from Jadavpur and Raja Sorkhel, 46, from Garia — do not fall in the category of “intellectuals”, the term Mamata uses to refer to writers and artistes.

But their arrest suggests that the government will focus on the nuts and bolts of the support base before — and if at all — action is contemplated against the high-profile personalities Mamata defended.

The two arrested have been slapped with the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) — the law Mamata cautioned the government against using on the writers and artistes. Against the usual 14-day remand under the Indian Penal Code (IPC), the UAPA permits custody up to 90 days. Under the UAPA, a chargesheet can be filed in 180 days, instead of 90 in the IPC.

Chatterjee and Sorkhel have been charged with collecting around Rs 1.25 lakh over the past six months for the People’s Committee Against Police Atrocities, which has been spearheading the tribal protest in Lalgarh.

The two belong to the Ganatantrik Adhikar Manch, an organisation that provides “a platform to pro-Maoist activists”, according to the police. It had lined up a rally at Esplanade on October 8. It is part of a larger platform called the Lalgarh Manch that is backed by Mahasweta Devi.

“We have specific information that the two had been helping the Maoist-backed committee in Lalgarh,” said Niraj Jain, the inspector-general of police (CID).

The arrests are the first against alleged Maoist sympathisers in the city since the Lalgarh stand-off began. On June 23, Gour Chakraborty was arrested while stepping out of a television studio but he had been directly linked with the Maoists as their spokesperson.

Last week, the police had said they had drawn up a list of 160 people, including 50 from Calcutta, who had allegedly helped the Maoist-backed committee. The list was apparently prepared on the basis of information provided by the arrested committee leader, Chhatradhar Mahato.

On Saturday, chief secretary Asok Mohan Chakrabarti had warned that those “helping any banned outfit in any way are making themselves liable for punishment under the UAPA”.

The committee is not banned — a point stressed by Mamata and those supporting it — but the police say it is “controlled and guided” by the Maoists.

The police said Chatterjee and Sorkhel used to hold street-corner meetings in the city to mobilise support for the Lalgarh movement and the Maoist operations there. “They were especially active in areas like Maniktala, Patipukur, Dum Dum and Ultadanga,” an officer said.

The police claimed that the two were frequent visitors to Lalgarh and were in touch with Maoist leaders.

http://www.telegraphindia.com/1091006/jsp/frontpage/story_11580687.jsp#