

Wary Maoists offer truce to government

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Maoists were a picture of defiance on one hand and conciliation on another on Monday.

They blasted railway tracks and a mobile tower on Day One of a two-day bandh in Jharkhand and Bihar called in protest against the Centre's "repressive" measures against them.

But in neighbouring West Bengal, CPI(Maoist) politburo member Koteswar Rao alias Kishanji promised a ceasefire if central forces withdrew from Lalgarh.

Mindful of an impending nationwide crackdown against Maoists in November, Kishanji claimed to have called up West Bengal ministers last week and offered a ceasefire.

He agreed to talk to the government, provided central paramilitary forces are withdrawn from Lalgarh and anti- Maoist operations are put on hold in the rest of the country.

Asked whether the CPI(Maoist) was ready to lay down arms and start a dialogue with the government, the Maoist politburo member said, " We can lay down arms in their areas only if they (government) lay down arms in our areas." Significantly, Kishanji admitted his party had killed senior Trinamool leader of Nandigram Nishikanta Mondol, the first instance of Maoists attacking any Trinamool leader in the state. "Our Nandigram zonal committee secretary S. K. Selim told me it was our work. Nishikanta had become totally corrupt and anti-people," he said.

Kishanji also claimed to have spoken to West Bengal chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, CPI general secretary A. B. Bardhan, his party colleague and state minister Nandagopal Bhattacharya and Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) national council member and minister Kshiti Goswami over the phone.

While Bardhan, now in Kerala, was not available for comment despite repeated attempts, Bhattacharjee vehemently denied having held telephonic conversations with the person believed to have masterminded the failed landmine explosion targeting his convoy a year ago.

Kishanji, however, claimed he had indeed spoken to the chief minister. " I told him to withdraw joint forces from Lalgarh and create a congenial atmosphere for talks. He said it was not possible as he was under pressure both from his own party and the Centre to intensify the crackdown against us,"

he said.

There were, however, confirmations by others of Kishanji speaking to Goswami and Bhattacharya.

"Kishanji told me that the RSP should demand withdrawal of joint forces from Lalgarh, as this was part of a larger anti- Communist trap laid by the Congress. I told him that such serious issues cannot be discussed over the phone and there should be direct talks. Kishanji said that would not be possible for him because his party was underground," Goswami said.

CPI state secretary Manju Majumdar said Kishanji had also called Bhattacharya last week. " Kishanji said his party cannot give up its armed struggle when the government was launching an armed assault on the people. Bhattacharya told him we can demand the withdrawal of central forces only if Maoists stopped individual killings and gave up violence," Majumdar said.

Stray violence marked the bandh in Bihar-Jharkhand.

Maoists struck on Sunday night in Jharkhand by blowing up railway tracks between Jharandih and Bokaro thermal stations in Bokaro district. The engine of a goods train was derailed and several other trains were held up following the blast.

In another incident, three trucks were torched at Isri in Giridih district while another West Bengal-bound truck was set on fire at Topchachi in Dhanbad district.

Maoists also damaged a bridge connecting Dumri with Grand Trunk Road. They also felled trees to block the Dumri- Giridih road during the day.

In Bihar, Maoists blasted a mobile tower of a private telecom tower with dynamite at Salaiya village and dug up roads at Chanda village of Aurangabad district. Shops were closed and vehicular traffic remained off the road in some parts of the state.

Two officials of a coalmine were also slain in Pakur district of Jharkhand on Monday but it was unclear whether it was also the handiwork of Maoists.

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