

Bengal Police Launch Green Hunt against Red Terror



Villagers of Jara on the road to Midnapore after fleeing their homes fearing police action. (File)

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Operation Green Hunt, the nationwide crackdown on Maoists' forest hideouts, has reached West Bengal – albeit silently. Though senior police officers remained tight-lipped, [CRPF](#) sources said the long awaited operation began a day after Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee visited Midnapore last week and gave his nod.

The crackdown began from Monday with a clear change in operational strategy. Instead of keeping its domination limited to main roads and towns, the joint forces are now entering the villages to engage Maoists in a direct fight.

Some 500 villagers of Baxibandh, Changshole and Dabra areas have fled and taken shelter in a makeshift camp organised by the Trinamool Congress and the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI) at Malibandh Primary School in Lalgarh.

The police have allegedly set ablaze at least 25 houses in Baxibandh. But journalists are not being allowed anywhere near these areas.

"The police entered our village after an eight-hour gun battle with the Maoists," 70-year-old Khageswar Mahato (name changed on request) of Baxibandh said over the phone.

"They burnt down most of the houses. I don't know when I will be able to return." Asked Shankar Soren, also of Baxibandh: "Has the government told the police to burn our houses? Let them fight Maoists. But why are they destroying our property?" Both Mahato and Soren are now staying in Malibandh Primary School.

Inspector general of police (law and order) Surajit Kar Purakayastha refused to comment when asked whether Operation Green Hunt has begun in the state. "I am not the right person to comment, especially when the chief minister has already said no such operation will take place in our state," he said.

The IGP, however, admitted that the strategy of combating the Maoists had changed this week. "Strategy never remains constant. We are now taking positions inside the villages to provide security to common people," he said.

The new strategy, senior police officers said, is to stay put inside villages and gradually form a chain to surround the rebels. Earlier, the joint forces had only set up their camps along the main roads and were conducting occasional raids in the villages, returning to the camps before night.

Now, based on available local intelligence and tracing of cell phone calls of the rebels, the joint forces are raiding specific villages and taking control of them so that Maoists do not return to their hideouts.

"Our objective is two-fold. First we will try to locate the top leaders and go after them, arrest or even kill them. The second is to establish positional domination in strategically located villages.

When Maoists will be forced to vacate the area, the government will begin development work on a war footing," a senior officer engaged in the operation said.

The new exercise began after Maoists gunned down four jawans [soldiers] of Eastern Frontier Rifles (EFR) in West Midnapore on November 8 barely hours after the CM left Midnapore town.

Since Thursday, the joint forces began capturing villages at Monidaha, Goaltor, Baxibandh, Binpur, Dharampur and Laxmanpur in Lalgah and Sarenga in Bankura. In some places in Bankura and Purulia, barricades were put up with sand bags and officers were instructed not to interact with villagers.

The Maoists, however, are refusing to budge. On Saturday, Maoist leader Bikash expressed confidence that Operation Green Hunt would fail. "It is impossible to clear out such a huge area. The government simply doesn't have so many policemen. The people are against the CRPF and we are arming the people. It is impossible to win a war against the people," Bikash said, but refused to divulge the Maoist strategy for overcoming the government's operation.

Maoist insiders, however, gave a glimpse of their plans. The rebels have now intensified their campaign among the villagers, urging them to continue their fight against the security forces.

Over 2,000 village youths of West Midnapore, Purulia and Bankura have already been given basic military training by the Maoists.

They form the first line of defence when the police raid the villages.

The plan is to further expand the 'people's militia' and the Peoples' Liberation Guerrilla Army, insiders said.

On Saturday, fresh firing took place between the joint forces and the Maoist at Laxmanpur village in Lalgah and inside Balukbasha forest in Bankura. The gun battles lasted for more than four hours.

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