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Lalgarh movement completes one year

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It was exactly a year on Monday since a landmine blast triggered by the Maoists targeting Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's convoy at Salboni in West Bengal's Paschim Medinipur sparked off a full-blown Maoist-backed tribal movement against alleged police atrocities.

It resulted in the West Bengal government deciding to launch a massive security offensive to flush out rebels from the region seven and a half months later.

Since then, there have been several arrests of Maoist-supported tribal leaders and the deaths of more than 150 Communist Party of India (Marxist) supporters.

Today, though the security forces have successfully reclaimed various areas previously dominated by Maoists, the writ of the rebels still rules supreme in numerous pockets of the region through the Police Santrash Birodhi Janasadharaner Committee (PSBJC), a front of the Maoists.

The Director-General of Police, Bhupinder Singh, said that in spite of the murders, there has been "considerable success" following the operation. The decision to build up a specialised anti-Maoist special force, on the lines of the Greyhounds, is also set to bolster the security operation.

"Previously the Maoists had almost liberated the zone such that no government machinery could function there. It could be re-established only after the operations started. We could also arrest several Maoist leaders in the meantime," Mr. Singh said.

After the launch of the security operation on June 18, one significant success has been the arrest of the elusive PSBJC convener Chhatradhar Mahato, following an undercover operation on September 26. The PSBJC, however, seems undeterred with the setback suffered, as it recently launched its military wing — Sidhu Kanu Gana Militia — to combat security forces.

"We have no choice"

"We started off with a democratic movement and wanted to resolve all issues through dialogue with the State government. But even after a year, if both the Centre and the State government unleashes terror on innocent villagers through the security forces in the name of flushing out Maoists, we are left with no choice than to opt for armed struggle," Santosh Patra, a prominent PSBJC leader, told The Hindu on Monday over telephone from the Lalgarh area.

The police, however, rubbish the PSBJC's claims. "The Maoists and the PSBJC are the same entity and the police have been saying so from the very beginning. It is only that they are publicly flaunting their military status," Mr. Singh said.

He added that various confidence-building measures like football matches have been initiated to gain back the people's trust.

"The response has been very good. A major section of the media has become Maoist-centric and goes by their version of the story," Mr. Singh said

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