

## **In Maoist badlands, state yet to fulfill its ‘restore school’ promise**

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More than a week has passed since Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee had promised to withdraw security forces from the schools in Maoist-hit West Midnapore district. But till date, security personnel continue to camp in the schools.

During a recent trip to the district, the chief minister had set November 15 as the deadline for withdrawal of security forces from the schools. Admitting the administration’s failure, the district magistrate of West Midnapore, N S Nigam, said so far a few classrooms in the 13 schools of Lalgarh, Binpur and Salboni — where police camps were set up in June — have been vacated.

The teachers can now hold their classes in the vacant rooms but the security force would remain posted there, Nigam added. Though classes have not yet resumed, the district administration is hopeful that students will soon start attending their schools.

Superintendent of Police, West Midnapore, Manoj Verma said a section of security forces has been shifted from various schools in Binpur and Salboni to a separate location. But he did not specify how many schools are currently being occupied by the security forces. The People’s Committee Against Police Atrocities (PCAPA), which has been protesting against the “occupation of government schools by security forces”, alleged that at least 30 secondary and primary schools in Binpur, Lalgarh, Salboni have remained closed since June.

“There is no sign of security forces withdrawing from Ramakrishna Vidyamandir, Kantapahari School and Gohamidanga School in Lalgarh,” said PCAPA leader Santosh Patra. Since the secondary examinations are slated for February, the teachers have started taking classes in temporary shelters on various school premises, said Patra.

Nigam, meanwhile, said the district administration has started constructing police camps at various places in the Maoist-affected areas.

The Calcutta High Court is currently hearing a PIL [Public Interest Litigation] filed by West Midnapore Bhumija Kalyan Samity, a social organisation which has sought court’s intervention in resuming the normal functioning of the schools in the district.

The PIL was filed in September and the High Court had asked the state government to file a report on the status of the schools. The petitioner has alleged that police camps have been set up in 15 schools in Salboni block and functioning of schools in Lalgarh and Binpur has completely collapsed. The case is likely to come up for hearing on Friday.

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