

**Telegraph India**

## **Rebel kill-&-burn spree**



The blaze at the sponge iron factory (Samir Mondal)

December 18, 2009

Jhargram: Maoists killed three CPM workers, set ablaze oil tankers on a national highway and torched a sponge iron factory and over a dozen vehicles on the first day of a protest against arrests which police denied having made.

Raju Adak and Joyram Bera had allegedly been picked up from Lalgah on December 6, but no one by those names has been produced in court — in Jhargram or Midnapore — in the past few days. “No such arrest has been made,” West Midnapore police chief Manoj Verma said.

The People’s Committee Against Police Atrocities identified the duo as its leaders and vowed to continue the agitation for their release. Police sources said the duo were “hardcore” Maoists who used the committee as a front. Residents of Lalgah, they have over 30 murder cases against them. “The Maoists committed today’s murders and engineered the arson,” said Verma.

The scale of violence and the audacity of the strikes left many stunned. “We haven’t seen such widespread violence since the joint forces moved into Lalgah six months ago. If we can’t tackle the situation now, it will spin out of control,” a district official said. Anil Chalak, 56, and Dayal Chalak, 45, were shot at Chandra village in Jhargram while Amal Patra, 60, was killed in Lalgah.

Following a committee warning yesterday threatening roadblocks, police had been patrolling the 15km stretch of national highway 6 between Lodhashuli, near Jhargram town, and Chichira, on the Jharkhand border. However, minutes after the patrol had left for another part of the road, 200 people stopped the tankers, ordered the drivers out and set them on fire.

The security forces returned in 15 minutes but such was the intensity of the blaze they could not go anywhere near. Vehicles were stopped and redirected but still some 2,000 trucks were stuck on the highway for several hours from 1pm.

As the flames engulfed the tankers, their tyres burst, and the forces mistook the sound for gunshots and started firing at a roadside jungle. The tankers burnt for four hours. The highway was opened to traffic past 5pm.

As the trucks burnt, about 150 people descended on the Reshmi Sponge Iron plant, only 2km away, and set it on fire. Over 12 trucks, two jeeps, a car, 20 motorcycles and several bicycles were torched. One of the jeeps belonged to an official, who was too shaken to speak. "The guards' quarters and the office were also looted," he mumbled.

The police said committee activists had accompanied the guerrillas on the raids which claimed the CPM supporters' lives. In Calcutta, home secretary Ardhendu Sen promised more forces for Jhargram.

Committee leader Asit Mahato said: "Our people set fire to the tankers but we were not involved in the arson at the factory. It was a spontaneous outburst from villagers angry with its pollution. Our movement for Adak and Bera's release will continue."

The committee ransacked a forest office in Goaltore tonight and set its furniture on fire. Two mini-trucks were torched. Home secretary Sen said the Centre had sought a report on the committee's allegations that CPM cadres and the forces had torched 40 huts on the outskirts of Lalgah last month.

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