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Enter Maoists, exit Mamata

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BARUN GHOSH AND NARESH JANA

Mamata Banerjee has cancelled an anniversary meeting to commemorate the Chhoto Angaria "massacre" victims, apparently keen to distance herself from Maoists who were bent on attending the event.

The public meeting was scheduled to be held in Midnapore town to pay tribute to Trinamul Congress supporters allegedly killed by CPM cadres in Chhoto Angaria on January 4 in 2001. The CPM has refused to acknowledge a massacre had taken place as no body could be found but Chhoto Angaria had become part of Bengal's political lexicon because of the storm it had unleashed nine years ago.

Trinamul had made elaborate arrangements this time to honour the memory of those suspected to have been killed. The West Midnapore Trinamul unit has already spent over Rs 1 lakh on arches and printing posters, leaflets, banners and festoons.

"Even a week ago, we were under the impression that the rally would be held when party MP from Tamluk Subhendu Adhikari had come down to Midnapore town to address a meeting and spoke in favour of today's rally," said West Midnapore Trinamul president Pranab Basu.

However, the rally was cancelled three days ago. The official reason was Mamata's preoccupation with a railway foundation ceremony at Amta in Howrah today.

But a Trinamul general secretary said: "We had information that Maoists, who had already begun a campaign among the villagers in Salboni, Goaltore, Garbeta and Lalgarh to back today's Midnapore rally, would turn up in large numbers. Didi had to cancel the rally as the Maoists' presence would have lent credence to the CPM's allegations about Trinamul links with the rebels. This was a wise move on her part to distance herself from the Maoists."

Trinamul's West Midnapore district chairman Mrigen Maity said the presence of Maoists at the rally would have "not only strengthened the CPM's allegation against us but also shown us in poor light at a time our *netri* has been consistently condemning violence by the Maoists".

Angered by the cancellation of the rally, the Maoist-backed People's Committee Against Police Atrocities this morning put up posters in Salboni and Midnapore town asking tribals to commemorate the day. In a poster nailed to a tree trunk at Bhatmore in Salboni, about 165km from Calcutta, the People's Committee accused Trinamul leaders of shielding those who had killed innocent people in Chhota Angaria and said they would be "tried in a people's court".

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