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# Delhi prepares to crush rural rebel army

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DANTEWADA, INDIA // After years of ignoring a sprawling, largely hidden war raging in the rural countryside that has killed more than 600 people so far this year alone, the Indian government is gearing up for a massive military counter-offensive this month.

India's Maoist insurgents, also called Naxalites – after Naxalbari in West Bengal, where the armed rebellion was first launched by local communists in 1967 – have expanded their area of operations to 22 of India's 28 states, up from nine states in 2004.

They have now seized nearly one-third of India's land mass across 223 districts, setting up their own parallel government in many of them. This rural insurgency is slowly but inexorably spreading into other states, with what analysts see as a long-term plan to extend their red corridor – called the "Compact Revolutionary Zone" in Maoist parlance – throughout India. Their ultimate stated goal is to capture the cities and topple India's democratically elected parliament.

Once dismissed by India's political class as a ragtag rural insurgency, Naxalites are now the country's "biggest internal security threat", in the words of the prime minister Manmohan Singh.

The government is now planning an all-out assault to stamp out this left-wing rural insurgency. It plans to deploy 25,000 paramilitary troops in Maoist strongholds in a large swath of rugged landscape across three states in Central India – Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa – joining 35,000 troops already stationed there.

New Delhi is offering full military assistance: armoured vehicles, mine-sweeping equipment; and it is mulling over a proposal to purchase unmanned aerial vehicles from EADS, a European aviation giant, to track down the rebel's movements in the country's remote rural interiors.

The aim of the counter-offensive, called Operation Greenhunt, government sources say, is to seize 40,000 square kilometres of Maoist-controlled areas and capture "dead or alive" 20 rebel leaders and 30 commanders who operate in the region with 12,000 armed rebels.

Beside the military effort, the government is also trying to rally public opinion against the rebels through a media campaign.

"Naxals are nothing but cold-blooded murderers," declared the caption of a half-page advertisement this month in regional newspapers in Chhattisgarh. This anti-Naxal advert displayed poignant images of a four-year-old girl, killed by rebels in 2006, and a 19-year-old youth murdered in August.

"Look at these innocent people – victims of Naxal violence," the advert said. But the government's planned military offensive has ignited a fierce debate about the correct strategy to defeat the rebels. Some human rights activists say that Naxalism cannot be wiped out by brute force, warning that the military effort will only exacerbate the cycle of violence and retaliation.

"We are headed for a serious civil war," warned Rajendra Sail, the former president of Chhattisgarh's Public Union of Civil Liberties. "We might see a Bosnian-like genocide in our tribal areas."

The explanation for the inexorable spread of Naxalism, he points out, is the socio-economic deprivation across much of rural India.

This left-wing extremism is taking deeper root due to the alleged impoverishment of India's Adivasis, or tribal population, at the hands of large companies which, in connivance with the state, want to use their land for industry and mining.

Since independence, more than 40 million tribals, bypassed by India's economic boom, have been displaced by economic development – development that the state sees as essential for creating jobs and providing the raw materials for growth. But less than a quarter of the tribals have been relocated and the economic benefits of industrialisation seldom trickle down to the displaced people.

In Chhattisgarh alone, more than 600 mineral-rich tribal villages have been emptied in the past decade as the state government has signed deals worth 130 trillion rupees (Dh234 million) with large corporations to manufacture steel and generate power.

"The state is becoming ruthless, irresponsible, unresponsive," Mr Sail said. "It is becoming obsequious to capitalists and ignoring the grievances of its people."

Naxalism feeds off the misery and anger of the disenfranchised people. The Naxalites insist that they are forces for good, and are standing up for the dispossessed. They justify their extreme violent tactics as a means of protecting Adivasis from what they claim is the theft perpetrated by the corporations.

Counter-rebel strategies have so far met with limited success, allowing violence to grow in the affected states. But the Indian government's tougher approach to the growing rebel problem has included setting up an anti-Naxal militia, the Salwa Judum, which in the local Gondhi dialect means "Purification Hunt".

Militia members have been armed by the state – not just with guns, but also spears, and bows and arrows. Caught up in the vicious fighting between Salwa Judum and Naxals in recent years, hundreds of thousands of Adivasis have fled their homes in villages around Chhattisgarh out of fear for their lives. A large number of tribals and dalits – those from the "lowest" castes – who support the rebels are beleaguered people fighting for basic survival and rights, Mr Sail says.

Violence begets more violence, he insists. Scrupulous respect for tribal rights is the best answer to the Naxalites. "The magic victory formula is: limited use of force plus maximum socio-economic development equals end of Naxalism," he said.

But **Brig BK Ponwar, the director of Chhattisgarh's Counter Terrorism and Jungle Warfare College in Kanker district**, believes the counter-offensive is the only way to end Naxalism.

He says that the Naxals are no longer a ragged-trousered Che Guevara-style revolutionary movement but are emerging as a sophisticated force that has continually managed to outgun, outrun and out-communicate the police. They cannot be quelled by non-military means, he says, because they are violent extremists who staunchly believe in Mao Zedong's doctrine of creating a classless society by overthrowing the existing state.

He claims they have also rejected recent government overtures to declare a ceasefire and come to the negotiating table.

**"This is a politico-military-socio-economic-psychological war," he said. "But military action has to be the engine of this effort."**

If the rebels can be cleared from the areas that they currently control, the government intends to initiate development projects such as roads, schools and hospitals in an attempt to woo the tribals away from the Maoists.

Until recently, India's growing middle-class in the cities far from the Naxalite corridor viewed the rebels as only a mildly worrying rural insurgency. But as rebel attacks have grown more audacious – and lethal – there is a growing concern over how to combat Naxalism.

In recent months, the rebels have attacked police forces, hijacked trains and carried out Taliban-style beheadings.

The casualty figures are comparable to other war zones such as Afghanistan. In more than 1,400 Naxal-related incidents up to August this year, nearly 600 people lost their lives. In the whole of 2008, 721 people died in 1,591 incidents. In the latest attack last week, a group of 200 Naxals, armed with sophisticated weapons, attacked a police station in Gadchiroli district in the Maharashtra state, killing at least 17 policemen, including a senior commander, in a pitched gun battle.

There have been very few triumphs in the fight against the insurgents. However, in late September, the Delhi police captured a top Naxal ideologue, the 58-year-old, London-educated chartered accountant Kobad Ghandy, A senior member of the Naxal politburo, the group's top policy-making body, he had operated underground with his wife, Anuradha, since the 1970s.

India's home minister, P Chidambaram, called Mr Ghandy the "most important Naxal catch", pointing out that the group had grown into a large army comprising not just peasants but also a core of intellectual sympathiser operating through several front organisations. "If the Maoists are serious champions of the poor, they should come forward for talks," he said. "I make a simple and straight forward appeal to them: 'Halt the violence.'

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