

India on brink of Maoist offensive

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NEW DELHI - In the lull before the storm that the central government has vowed to unleash on Maoist rebels this month, voices of caution are being heard against precipitating an armed confrontation that could further hurt marginalized and largely indigenous populations in the worst affected central and eastern Indian states.

"It would seem that the government prefers the Sri Lankan model of pursuing a military solution to insurgency rather than the United Kingdom model of political negotiation, which brought lasting peace in Northern Ireland," said noted lawyer and human rights activist Colin Gonsalves.

"What is the Sri Lankan model? If you need to take out two insurgents, you kill 20," Gonsalves told Inter Press Service (IPS).

Gonsalves said the government was "not going to bother" with a campaign mounted by prominent intellectuals in the country and abroad to head off "Operation Green Hunt" - code name for the deployment of 70,000 paramilitary troops in the so-called "Red Corridor" that runs through parts of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal states.

In a letter to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, dated October 12, the intellectuals, including Booker Prize-winning author Arundhati Roy and American political activist Noam Chomsky, charged that the government's offensive was an attempt to crush "democratic and popular resistance against dispossession and impoverishment" and a move that seemed to be geared towards facilitating the entry and operation of "large corporations and paving the way for unbridled exploitation of the natural resources and people" in the affected regions.

Maoists - also known as Naxalites after Naxalbari district in West Bengal state, where they first led a peasant uprising against landlords in 1967, have steadily fed on rural poverty and deprived tribal populations. The cadres of the Communist Party of India (CPI - Maoist) the political wing of the Maoists, are now said to be 20,000 strong.

In a stepped-up campaign of violence targeting police, politicians and government officials, the Maoists have killed about 1,200 people since 2008. Killings, abductions, and raids on police stations are part of the Maoists' stated strategy of pursuing a "people's war" and installing a "people's government"

following the revolutionary tenets of the late Chinese leader, Mao Zedong.

On June 22, the central government banned the CPI (Maoist) and deemed it to be a terrorist organization. But this has not deterred the Maoists from pursuing their path of violence and guerilla-style attacks on the establishment.

In October, the rebels ambushed and killed 17 policemen in Maharashtra state, decapitated a police officer in Jharkhand, attacked police stations in West Bengal and hijacked a train before holding its passengers hostage for several hours.

The rebels operate mostly in mineral-rich tribal areas, which have attracted billions of dollars worth of investment by prospectors, claiming they are protecting local people from exploitation by outsiders.

In their letter to Manmohan, the group of intellectuals pointed to recent research that showed that the levels of income and wealth inequality in India had increased steadily and drastically since the mid-1980s when India began a process of economic liberalization.

"A rough overview of this growing inequality is found by juxtaposing two well-known facts, they said. One, "in 2004-05, 77% of the population spent less than 20 rupees [four US cents] a day on consumption expenditure. Two, "according to the annual World Wealth Report released by Merrill Lynch and Capgemini in 2008, the millionaire population in India grew in 2007 by 22.6% from the previous year, which is higher than in any other country in the world."

Citing the report of an expert group in India's Planning Commission, the letter also said that the widening levels of disparity and the continuing problems of social deprivation and structural violence were being compounded by the "all-out effort to restrict access to common property resources", giving rise to social anger, desperation and unrest.

On October 30, India's Home Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram made what appeared to be a final appeal to the Maoists to sit down with the government for talks. "The Maoists are still recruiting and procuring more arms," Chidambaram told reporters. "I am asking them to come forward for talks. If you [Maoists] sincerely espouse the cause of the poor, for their forest rights and development, if you are serious champions of the poor, come and talk."

Curiously, Chidambaram did not make the laying down of arms a precondition for negotiations. "I am too realistic to know that they will not do so," he said.

Apart from the pressure being brought on the government to desist from resorting to the military option, questions are being raised as to whether it has the capacity to carry out precision strikes against the Maoists without displacing or otherwise causing harm to already impoverished and deprived populations.

Ajay Sahni, executive director of the independent, New Delhi-based Institute of Conflict Management, believes that the government should have waited to build up sufficient capacity before announcing its decision to take on the Maoists. "This cannot be done overnight," Sahni said. He calls for "strategic planning and preparation for at least five years".

Sahni, who is considered an expert on the Maoist insurgency, told IPS that the whole concept of Operation Green Hunt was flawed and the codename itself unfortunate. "I find the idea of hunting people offensive," he said.

According to Sahni, the central police forces available for the planned strike are going to be stretched too thinly across a vast geographical area to be effective. They are also going to be operating with very little intelligence against committed and well-indoctrinated cadre, he said. "There is a real danger that the wrong people are going to get killed because of poor intelligence gathering."

In fact, a June 12 statement released by the CPI (Maoist) declared that the Indian state did not have the capacity to fight its cadres across the different states they were operating in.

Sahni said the only way to address the Maoist insurgency is to address the grievances of the people, because the Maoists leadership is "harvesting grievances" and will be looking to provoke more repression by the armed forces, which will, in turn, cause greater alienation.

"There are," Sahni said, "basic issues that need to be addressed first such as the fact that 77% of the population (836 million people) are living on less than 20 rupees [42 US cents] a day and more than half that number on less than 10 rupees, which means that they are on the edge of survival."

Another issue that Sahni believes feeds disaffection with the government is the popular perception of corruption at all levels. "There is very little accountability in areas that are controlled by the Maoists at one end and, at another there are allegations that billions of dollars have been stashed away in Swiss banks by corrupt politicians and official," he said.

Skepticism regarding the success of Operation Green Hunt has also come from S K Sinha, an army general who, after retirement, served as governor in the insurgency-hit states of Assam in the northeast as well as the Indian-administered state of Jammu and Kashmir.

"After independence, the transition from a colonial police to a people-friendly police befitting a democracy has not taken place," Sinha wrote in an op-ed article published in the Times of India newspaper on Wednesday. "Insecurity of tenure and the lure of wealth have undermined police functioning."

Sinha has urged the government to adopt a four-pronged strategy of sound intelligence, good policing, security operations and poverty elimination, all of which are to be "implemented concurrently" to contain the insurgency.

As an immediate step, Sinha suggests that the \$1.5 billion worth of development projects recently sanctioned by the government be speedily implemented with "close monitoring" to prevent the money being siphoned away through "ruthless action against defaulters".

(Inter Press Service)

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