

The Telegraph

Maoist 'melting plot' worries govt

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New Delhi, Oct. 18 [2009]: Armed Naxalites could resort to an absence offensive in response to the first security thrust into their strongholds.

Intelligence inputs reaching here from parts of Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Jharkhand suggest that large numbers of cadres may leave their jungle bases and “melt away into urban anonymity” over the next few weeks as part of a thought-out tactic.

“It makes good sense for them,” said a senior intelligence official based here. “They don’t have the firepower the government is in the process of employing. By vanishing initially, they will not only escape a full-blown assault, they will also be able to draw security forces deeper into their habitat and trap them in a long-drawn guerrilla conflict.”

Freed of election vigil, more than a dozen paramilitary battalions comprising the BSF, the CRPF and the ITBP are moving into Naxalite-dominated areas in preparation for an integrated offensive christened Operation Green Hunt.

But reports that the Naxalites will dissolve their jungle concentrations and slip away are worrying security strategists. “We may actually face little or no opposition in the first flush,” said one. “But that also means we will get no catch. Rather, they will retain the advantage of when and where to confront us.”

Most Naxalite units have pack-and-carry mobility and possess rat-like familiarity with the forests they hold. Other than the Abujmadh jungles along the junction of Bastar in southern Chhattisgarh and Orissa’s Malkangiri district, Naxalites are not known to have “permanent” bases anywhere; most officers familiar with their ways are convinced of their ability to “vaporise at short notice”.

The Abujmadh base, said to be located in near-impenetrable wooded hills, will be tougher to put a lid on or dismantle, but then security forces have never been able to so much as approach Abujmadh.

Not that Naxalites in other parts have been easy to net. As one Intelligence Bureau (IB) officer put it: “They will probably leave behind trails of where they cooked or camped, but beyond the few known faces, they are tough to trace because they are like everybody else, they just mingle, very tough to separate from locals who, for various reasons, usually offer very little help.”

The officer went on to articulate fears of “substantive collateral damage” if the Naxalites are able to “frustrate” security operations with their disappearing act.

“Very often, because of poor on-ground intelligence, the forces conduct harsh search operations,” he said, “innocents get trampled upon and disaffection spreads, things turn counter-productive. Some of that has happened in Lalgarh where the security forces met with little armed resistance because the cadres slipped out. But in the process, locals got hurt and they remain almost violently opposed to the security forces and the state itself.”

It is with an eye on restricting the movement of Naxalites in the run-up to the security build-up that special emphasis is being given to border regions between affected states. The idea, officials say, is to allow security forces to operate “free of and above jurisdictional constraints” and allow real-time cross-border monitoring along a single chain of command.

“That is the main reason why we are concentrating the paramilitary forces, rather than the state police, along the borders so that there is no confusion of jurisdiction and command. Also paramilitary forces have the freedom to conduct search and pursuit operations across state borders,” a senior officer said. He conceded, though, that paramilitary forces have another set of handicaps flowing from their lack of familiarity with local people, language, customs and terrain.

A CRPF officer **The Telegraph** spoke to last week had said of his Chhattisgarh experience: “It is one thing to be better armed and supplied, but that can add up to little if your jawans [soldiers] do not know left from right. Many of my chaps are just too lost in the Chhattisgarh jungles because they know next to nothing about the place.”

Despite the rockjawed determination of Union home minister P. Chidambaram to forge ahead with the anti-Naxalite offensive, a fair section of officials and experts remains sceptical about its success for a variety of reasons.

The manner in which the offensive has been propagandised by North Block is becoming a serious concern. “You do not launch such operations with public declarations that almost sound like war cries,” said a Chhattisgarh police officer. “They are calling it a psychological offensive, but what this daily bugling from Delhi has done is to put the pressure on us. A huge sense of public expectation has built up and if we don’t achieve tangible results quickly, we will be the losers of that so-called psychological offensive.”

Top cop K.P.S. Gill, who was adviser to the Chhattisgarh government on anti-Naxalite operations for a while, has also criticised the manner in which Chidambaram is marshalling the offensive.

“Such operations have to be conducted on the ground, with local police and local people, you cannot win such battles by making plans in Delhi boardrooms because reality is ever-changing and strategy needs to be tailored accordingly,” Gill has said.

Other security experts have questioned the very preparedness of the security forces — men, machines and intelligence — to take the Naxalites head on at this juncture. Most of them have

been counselling a more gradualist approach, beginning with a quantum increase in the number of boots on the ground. At the moment, even in the government's reckoning, the jawan-to-population ratio is far below the recommended minimum.

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