

Biggest offensive against Maoists begins in state

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Mumbai: After quietly preparing for several months, the Centre has finally launched its biggest ever offensive against the Maoists.

Authoritative sources told *DNA* that as of now the operation will be limited to Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra. Senior officials said more aggressive and better coordinated operations will start in Jharkhand and Orissa, but that will take time.

Sources in paramilitary forces said though the Union home ministry, especially incumbent minister P Chidambaram, wants talks and has been appealing to the Maoists to give up arms, securitymen were being pushed to start the operations against the rebels at the earliest. "We are not part of these initiatives (offer for talks) of the government," said a senior home ministry official.

Senior officials revealed that the original plan was to simultaneously start the operations in four worst-affected states -- Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa -- but it was altered because of the on-going assembly elections in Jharkhand.

Police sources in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, and Manpur in Rajnandgaon, Chhattisgarh, on Thursday confirmed that a joint anti-Maoist operation had begun. "Around 3,000 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel were deployed strategically in Gadchiroli for over a month as part of the operation," a senior police officer said. CRPF and Border Security Force (BSF) personnel have also taken strategic positions in villages on the other side of the border in Chhattisgarh, sources said.

More than 45,000 trained personnel drawn from the three paramilitary organisations - CRPF, BSF and Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) -- posted in Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra will take on the rebels. Around 25,000 personnel are to be deployed in Jharkhand and Orissa, officials in the Union home ministry said.

The highest number -- 37,000 -- of CRPF personnel will be deployed in Chhattisgarh. Sources said initially 25,000 personnel were sent to the state, but another 12,000 men, who were taken out from Kashmir, were specifically trained and sent in. "We had to tamper with the training part because in Kashmir operations take place in residential areas or public places, whereas in Naxal-affected areas it is jungle warfare that matters," said a senior home ministry official, adding that help also came from the army, which was part of the training programme. "Most of the men are already in place as per the plan but they got busy with the election process so we could not start the operations in all the [Maoist-affected] states," added the officer.

In Maharashtra, the troops are combing the Maoist-infested villages in Gadchiroli to get acclimatised to the terrain. The district is spread over an area of 15,000 square km -- the north-south stretch spans 350 km. "Knowing the terrain and the forest routes is very crucial and our men are helping the central troops with that," a senior police officer said.

Officials said the role of the BSF is also crucial because five of its field units - in addition to the police and intelligence agencies - have been specifically deployed to collect intelligence by mingling with villagers. "The basic idea is to go inside these jungles and clean them up, both of Maoists and landmines. We have to hold the ground and better coordination will be needed with the state police and within paramilitary forces," the officer said. Around 5,000 BSF personnel, including field intelligence units, have been posted in Chhattisgarh while help is also coming from the ITBP, which has deployed about 2,000 men for the first time in Maoist strongholds.

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