

Ground offensive against Maoists begins

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Nagpur/Raipur: The first major ground offensive against Naxalites has started, with police forces in Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh launching a joint operation. The offensive was being kept in abeyance for the end of the Jharkhand elections.

The first part of the offensive, which will include searching for Naxals in the interiors of Gadchiroli in Maharashtra and in Maoist-dominated areas of Chhattisgarh, was launched on December 25 as part of what is being termed as Police Week (December 25 to January 1), sources said.

It is for the first time that something like a Police Week is being observed in these areas. However, CRPF's Special DG Vijay Raman, commanding the anti-Naxal operations said: "There is nothing like starting or end of an operation. It's on since beginning itself."

Sources said the operation is being conducted jointly by the CRPF, regular Gadchiroli police, the Special Action Group (SAG) created specially for anti-Naxal operations in Maharashtra, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), BSF and the regular Chhattisgarh police.

The ITBP and BSF have taken up position at strategic locations in the forest areas of Rajnandgaon and Kanker districts in Chhattisgarh, cutting off supply lines of Maoists from Maharashtra. The forces are trying to establish their dominance in this area, which had seen a major attack on security forces in July last year, in which 32 security personnel, including superintendent of police V K Choubey, had lost their lives. DG Raman has already visited these areas.

Chhattisgarh director general of police Vishwaranjan said the objective of the joint operation by the state and Central forces was to station security forces in the area for a reasonable period to allow civil administration to take up development initiatives there. However, there will be surgical strikes wherever necessary.

Confirming that Maoist supply lines have been cut off at many places, he refused to divulge details, saying "you will come to know about it once the forces make advancements". The plan is to extend the operation further to Jharkhand, now that the state has a government. "Taking the state government on board is mandatory," officials said.

While the forces were deployed immediately after the Maharashtra Assembly elections two months ago, they have been using the time till now to get acclimatised to the terrain, and conducting their operations separately. The past few days they started long range patrols (LRP) deep into the interiors.

"The real coordinated exercises have been started as part of the special week being observed," sources said. "The nature of the operation (earlier) was to search for Naxals hiding in the forests on the basis of intelligence reports. Now, a massive hunt is on generally in the forests." Officials claim that the Naxals are already feeling the heat. "This is seen from the appeal to lower-rung policemen and officials to revolt against their superiors, with Naxals calling them fellow-sufferers," said an official.

He also claimed that while they had plans for a big strike during the recently-concluded winter session of Maharashtra Legislature at Nagpur, they backtracked because of forces sealing off the entire area.

Police sources said at least 10 more battalions might be needed for extending the joint operations to Bastar region in Chhattisgarh, which will be started after the operations in Rajnandgaon and Kanker.

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