

PC becomes the flaming arrowhead Minister adds a sharp edge to Maoist fight

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Chidambaram

New Delhi, Oct. 11: As the security offensive against Naxalites gears up, it is increasingly apparent that the effort is being fuelled by the personal, and contentious, edge and urgency Union home minister P. Chidambaram has imparted it.

Depending on what side of the discordant debate the voices belong to, Chidambaram is being credited with — or blamed for — lending the offensive a flaming arrowhead.

“High time someone cut through the mumbo-jumbo and saw the Maoist threat for what it is,” says Ajai Sahni of the Institute of Crisis Management. “At least this home minister is beginning to speak the right language.”

Such lauding is anathema to the likes of human rights activist Gautam Navlakha. “Chidambaram has ended the hypocrisy of it all and put the blunt face of the state on display,” says Navlakha, “but he should have the guts to call this a war because deploying specially trained counter-insurgency forces is not kabaddi. He should also know he is fashioning a disastrous policy, he can start this war but he will have no control over ending it, he does not realise what he is getting the country into.”

Chidambaram’s elaborate bureaucracy is almost as unanimous about the booster-propeller role their relatively new boss has come to play on the Naxalite front.

As one top officer put it: “The Prime Minister flagged Naxalism as the main internal security threat several years ago, but it is only after Chidambaram came to North Block that the ministry really began to respond to that warning from the top. We were in a prolonged state of reactive ambivalence, Chidambaram has radicalised it into a fairly provocative pro-activism. He has determined to take the battle to them, it’s his dare, not the Naxalites’ and that’s new.”

The most important thing Chidambaram has done, the officer said, was to send out an “unambiguous no-tolerance message to armed Naxalites”.

“It is critical to display determination at the top, and Chidambaram has done that,” the officer added. “This has achieved two things — it has told the Naxalites what they are up against, and it has told the bureaucracy and the forces that their boss means and expects business.”

The one thing that has clearly changed over the past few weeks is the level of orchestration among forces. “Call it propaganda, call it psychological warfare, but Chidambaram is making it seem like a gathering storm for the Naxalites, as if all the forces at the command of the government are in a new concert against them,” the official said.

“There has been a spate of anti-Naxalite advertising, the air force has been speaking of a role, various police and paramilitary wings have become more voluble, there is a visible build-up to something, almost a physically visible warning.”

A top Intelligence Bureau (IB) official indicated that Chidambaram has been tuning up the work ethic behind-the-scenes, too. “He has surely made accountability essential,” he said. “There is, for instance, a daily meeting now at the Multiple Agency Centre (MAC), where intelligence inputs from various agencies, including the paramilitary and police, are exchanged, analysed and sent up. With Chidambaram there is little scope for excuses.”

To a retired official with old familiarity with the home ministry, Chidambaram’s current posture has brought back memories of his first stint as junior minister for internal security under Rajiv Gandhi, particularly his role in Operation Black Thunder of 1988.

Sikh militants had regrouped in Amritsar’s Golden Temple after Bluestar’s bloody flush-out and were threatening to resume Khalistani insurgency from the holy fortress.

Worried about a repeat of the disastrous communal fallout of Bluestar, there were many in the Congress establishment who were against another security crackdown.



A relative of a policeman killed during the Maoist attack in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district grieves during a state funeral

“But Chidambaram seemed to have no confusion the militants had to be evicted by force,” the official remembers. “He’s the man who marshalled Black Thunder, overriding political fears of a repeat of Bluestar and its consequences. Although Buta Singh was the home minister, it was Chidambaram who took Black Thunder from conception to the very end, clinically, almost coldly. He is a man who wants to achieve what he sets out to do.”

But equally strong, though not as vocal, are the notes of caution emerging from some of Chidambaram’s officials. They concern a whole range of issues from the tactical to the logistical.

“Launching a propaganda offensive against the Naxalites is new, but it could also backfire,” warns one senior officer. “The Naxalites are no spring chickens, they are hardened and committed, all this noise will not deter them. On the contrary, it puts a huge onus on the government and the forces now to succeed in this effort. Are we prepared?”

Independent security experts and officers alike have been pointing out grave deficiencies in the engagement-readiness of the forces. They lack for numbers, they are ill-equipped and poorly trained, they have little familiarity with their operating terrain and, probably most of all, they may suffer a huge commitment disadvantage to their Maoist adversaries.

As one CRPF officer who has done a stint in Chhattisgarh said: “The Maoists are in this fight for life, we are there just for our terms, and many of us are just waiting to get out, it’s not a battle that inspires the jawans [soldiers] or their officers. And Chidambaram’s determination does not necessarily outweigh that.”

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