

Maoists ready to talk, but with gun in hand

Mohua Chatterjee , The Times of India, November 6, 2009

NEW DELHI: For the first time since they held talks with the Andhra Pradesh government in mid-2004, the Maoists have in a formal statement offered a ceasefire if the government dropped its pre-condition that the ultras lay down arms and abjure violence.

While ruling out accepting the demand that they must end violence, the Maoists said, "An agreement could be reached on by both sides on a ceasefire if Manmohan Singh and P Chidambaram give up their irrational, illogical and absurd stand that Maoists should abjure violence."

The statement, dated November 3, was released by CPI(Maoist) central committee member and party spokesperson Azad on Thursday and is seen as a response to the Centre's concerted effort to use the threat of massive anti-Naxal operations, its offers of a peaceful settlement to coax the ultras to the negotiating table and as a sign that the publicity offensive against Maoist violence may be working.

There was immediate concern that the Maoists might be falling back on their time-tested gambit of buying time to recoup and rearm as they did when the talks with Andhra Pradesh government dragged on. Yet, the preparedness of the Maoists to reach for the olive branch held out by the government is indicative of the pressure they are experiencing, with the Centre joining forces with state governments and, to boot, embarking on a serious propaganda war over Maoist atrocities.

The Maoists, however, have taken care not to give the impression of any weakness or flagging commitment to the cause. Their Central Committee cockily said, "Asking Maoists to lay down arms as a pre-condition for talks shows the utter ignorance of Manmohan Singh and P Chidambaram regarding historical and socio-economic factors that gave rise to the Maoist movement."

The calculation not to suggest that they were under pressure - something that the battle-hardened class warriors would not appreciate - was evident from the list of patently impossible demands made as the pre-condition for an engagement - from withdrawal of security forces from Naxal-affected states to repeal of anti-terror laws.

It is of course clear that the government is unlikely to accept demands like withdrawal of security forces from Naxal-hit areas but the statement provides a glimpse of a possible churn within the Maoist movement where some voices have spoken of the need to explore the political process as did the ultra movement in Nepal.

"The party made it clear that laying down arms means a betrayal of people. We have taken up arms for defence of peoples' rights and for achieving their liberation from exploitation and oppression," the statement said.

In 2004 too, Maoists were allowed to keep their arms as their leaders held talks with the state government. The difference this time could be that the Centre appears dead serious about its operation "green hunt" and has roped in even reluctant states like Orissa and Jharkhand to join the battle. The success of recent operations in Chhattisgarh and West Bengal have also indicated that the Maoists are vulnerable.

The demands thrown by Maoists include stopping "illegal abductions" of Maoists and suspected supporters of the ultras, halt to "torture and murder" of unarmed people, instruction to security forces to desist from "raping women in Maoist-dominated areas", halting destruction of property, withdrawal of police and paramilitary camps from interior areas and disbandment of vigilante efforts like [Salwa Judum](#).

The Maoists have also asked for a repeal of laws like Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), Chhattisgarh Special Powers Act, Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) etc.

Clearly, even while offering to engage, the Maoists have been practising the propaganda warfare.

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