

Chhattisgarh's 'popular' coalition against the Naxals could prove to be misguided, warns AJAI SAHNI



Look who is waving the red flag now

THE landmine attack on civilians by the Maoists in Chhattisgarh has, once again, brought transient focus on the widening depredations of left-wing extremists, but this is only the most recent and worst of a continuous string of tragedies that have passed largely unnoticed, not only in this state, but across at least 165 of India's 602 districts currently afflicted by the Maoist insurgency. Chhattisgarh in 2005 emerged as the worst affected state after Andhra Pradesh — displacing Bihar and Jharkhand — and Dantewada district, where the latest excess was committed, is by far the worst off in the state.

The steadily deteriorating conditions in Chhattisgarh can be traced directly to the criminal irresponsibility and incompetence of the security policy establishment in the state, its immediate neighbourhood, and at the Centre. The most dramatic expansion of Maoist capacities in Chhattisgarh occurred during the "ceasefire" in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh over May 2004-April 2005, an initiative that was strongly supported by the Union home ministry. The Maoist engagement in the "peace process" was essentially tactical, and was exploited for political consolidation in Andhra Pradesh and active expansion in the neighbourhood. It is significant that a preponderant section of the Maoist leadership in Chhattisgarh is drawn from Andhra Pradesh, with Chhattisgarh providing much of the "cannon fodder" for the movement.

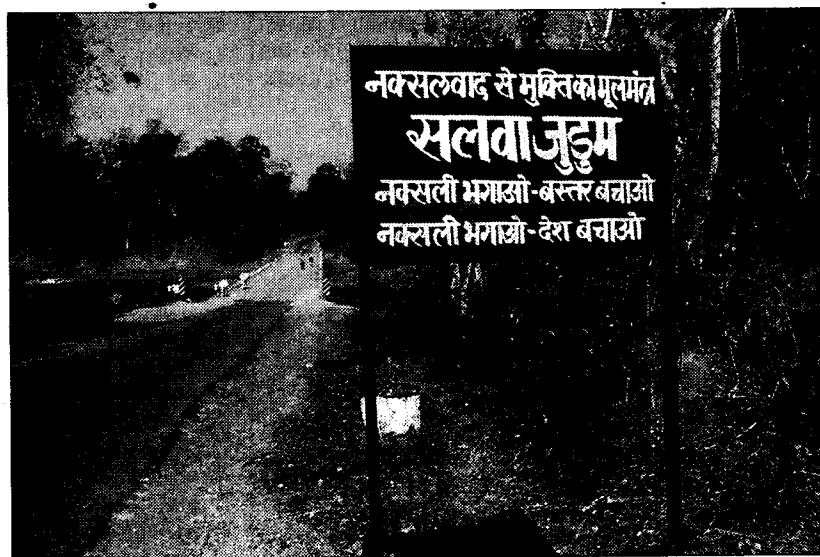
Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Raman Singh has repeatedly pointed to the impossibility of effectively fighting the Maoists in his state when surrounding states pursue conflicting policies. In-

deed, Singh has been outspoken about the utter incoherence of state responses to Maoist terrorism, and has argued vigorously for a coordinated national approach: "State governments do not know what to do... Delhi does not know what it is doing. This confusion must be cleared immediately."

If evidence was needed that state governments do not know what to do, it is

phemistically projected as a spontaneous "peace-campaign", Salva Judum literally translates to "purification hunt", an often-violent state-led mobilisation of the tribals against the Maoists that is anything but the spontaneous "uprising" portrayed in official pronouncements.

Salva Judum has exposed the hapless tribals to repeated rounds of violence by the Maoists, and has displaced, according



Tuesday's Naxal strike shows the dangers of Salva Judum and its enthusiasm

abundant in Singh's own policies, which do not display particular sagacity. Indeed, the second of the most extraordinary aspects of recklessness that has contributed to rising violence in Chhattisgarh has been the misguided and misconceived Salva Judum campaign, spearheaded by Leader of the Opposition, Mahendra Karma, of the Congress Party, but actively supported by Singh's government. Eu-

to various estimates, anything up to 40,000 tribals, who are now huddled in ill-equipped government relief camps in the worst conceivable conditions. Instead of "cleansing" their villages of Maoists, Salva Judum has, in fact, cleansed a large number of tribal villages of their residents, who have become "refugees in their own land". Those who have remained in their homes are now vulnerable to reprisal at-

tacks by the Maoists; worse, the "relief camps" have come under repeated Maoist attack.

Even before the mine attack on February 28, the Maoists had attacked tribals mobilised for the Salva Judum on several occasions. In the most significant incidents just this year, on February 26, two persons were killed and 25 injured when Maoists raided a government-run relief camp at Munder village in Dantewada district. Earlier, on January 29, in a similar raid on a "relief camp" at Gangalur in Dantewada district, eight civilians and three Maoists were killed. There were several such incidents last year as well, since June 2005 — when the Salva Judum was launched. On January 31, 2006, Chhattisgarh Home Minister Ramchar Netam admitted that 95 villagers involved with Salva Judum had been killed by Maoist rebels in Bastar till December 31, 2005.

And these are not, as the government is eager to state, "acts of desperation" by Maoists who have been "cornered" and "demoralised" by the "popular" Salva Judum "uprising". Indeed, Maoist attacks on security forces in Chhattisgarh have also increased dramatically, and the state accounted for the largest number of SF fatalities in 2005, with 48 personnel killed, far ahead of Bihar (29), Jharkhand (27), and Andhra Pradesh (21). (Data: Institute for Conflict Management.)

Salva Judum has exposed large numbers of innocent tribals to unacceptable risks; it has encouraged vigilantism and there are significant reports of excesses by Salva Judum "volunteers" and special police officers (SPOs); large tracts of land — often with standing crops — have been abandoned by the villagers, many of whom experience acute food shortages in "relief camps"; there is also a perception that a "vast amount of corruption has crept into" the movement, and that it has taken on the character more of political adventurism than of a serious effort to neutralise the Maoist terror.

Worse, Singh's government is being encouraged in its folly by the Centre, and there have been recent statements that suggest that the "successful" Salva Judum is to be "extended" to other states as well. On February 23, following a meeting with police officers of Chhattisgarh, special secretary of the Union home ministry, A.K. Mitra, spoke of the "success" of the Salva Judum, and said that it had been decided "to encourage resentment among the people wherever possible against the Maoists". Senior police sources added further, "It has been decided to spread the Salva Judum campaign in other infested states."

Such a course of action would be nothing less than disastrous and constitutes a complete and immature abdication of responsibilities on the part of the state. Popular mobilisation may play some role in a counter-terrorist strategy well after the security forces have established their domination in particular areas; but where they are unable even to effectively protect themselves, provoking the people to "resist" the terrorists in regions that are immensely under-policed will only invite retaliation and untold suffering on the heads of the innocent.

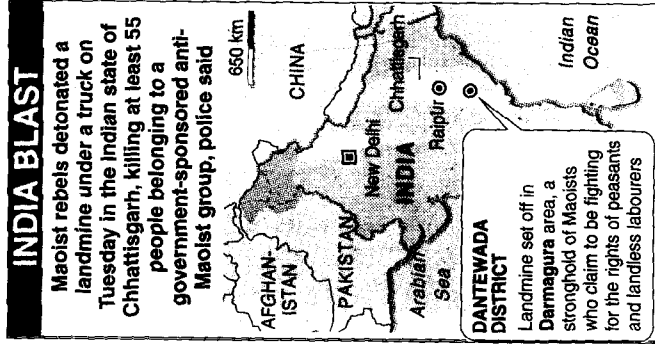
Ajay Sahni is with the Institute for Conflict Management, New Delhi

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INDUSTRIAL

Maoists kill 50 in mine blast

Villagers had gone to attend anti-Naxal campaign in Chhattisgarh



HTC and AGENCIES Raipur, February 28

IN A major attack, Maoists on Tuesday killed at least 50 people and injured 20, besides abducting over 60 people travelling in trucks after triggering landmine blasts in Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh, the police said. The Union home ministry, however, denied the reports, saying that there were only 25 known casualties.

Analysts said the attack showed that New Delhi could ill-afford to take the growing Maoist threat lightly, saying the rebels posed a bigger danger than Kashmiri Islamist militants.

The Maoists carried out the explosions when the villagers were returning to Konta from Errebore after attending an anti-Naxal campaign in the Dornapal area, the police said. Some of those who were wounded were flown to neighbouring Andhra

Pradesh state by helicopter.

Union home minister Shivraj Patil held a review meeting with top officials — including home secretary VK Duggal — on the security situation in the Naxal-hit region. No request has been received from the Chhattisgarh government for any additional forces to tackle the situation.

A Union home ministry spokesman said the Centre was in constant touch with the state government and was closely monitoring the situation.

High alert in AP, Orissa

Andhra Pradesh was put on high alert in view of the landmine blasts in Chhattisgarh, the police said. The spot where the Maoists triggered the landmine blasts was just 35 km from the Andhra Pradesh border.

The Andhra Pradesh government came to the aid of its Chhattisgarh

tisgarh counterpart and agreed to provide all medical help to the tribals injured in the blasts.

While there is no good hospital near the accident site on the Chhattisgarh side of the state border, the government hospital at Bhadrachalam on the Andhra Pradesh side is closer and has better medicare facilities.

Andhra Pradesh home minister K. Jana Reddy said that, out of the 28 tribals who were seriously injured, those in a very critical condition were shifted to a Bhadrachalam hospital.

A high alert was also issued in Orissa's Malkangiri district. The 30 km from the Motu police station area in Malkangiri district. It is suspected that several tribals from the district were there to participate in the meet-

ing at Chhattisgarh. Express-

ing concern over the attack, neighbouring CM Naveen Patnaik said that, to avert further attacks on the tribals in villages bordering Chhattisgarh, the government had undertaken special security measures.

More armed police and CRPF personnel have been deployed in the bordering areas, while extensive combing operations have begun in certain vulnerable areas immediately after the Chhattisgarh killings, he said.

The state director-general of police said that there was every possibility of the Chhattisgarh Naxals having fled into Orissa to avoid intensive raids by the police after the killings. Their possible escape routes through forest and mountain terrain were under watch and round-the-clock patrolling had also begun, he added.