

## 'Maoists forcibly recruiting child soldiers in Chhattisgarh'

Maoist guerrillas are forcibly recruiting minors in their ranks as child soldiers in large forested areas of Chhattisgarh, police say.

'Rebels are conducting a massive drive for child soldiers in their forested hideouts in Chhattisgarh's Bastar region, which is close to Andhra Pradesh,' Inspector General Girdhari Nayak of the state's anti-Maoist operation told IANS here.

'It's a forced recruitment. Rebels are carrying away children without their parents' consent and are training them to handle even sophisticated weapons and use them for attacks on civilians and police installations,' the officer said.

'We have reports that insurgents have been forcibly taking away tribal boys and girls from schools in poverty-stricken hamlets of the Bastar region,' he added.

For about two decades, rebels have been running a parallel government in a 40,000 sq km area in Bastar, particularly in Bijapur and Dantewada districts.

Police officials in Dantewada and Bijapur say the present drive of recruitment of minors is for a child unit - Krantikari Adivasi Balak Sangh - a banned frontal organisation of the Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist) in Chhattisgarh.

According to them, the rebels are targeting children in the age group of 12-18 years and are focussing on school dropouts.

The government has set up 23 make-shift relief camps in Bijapur and Dantewada where about 50,000 people, mostly tribals, are living following threats from the Maoists since June 2005 when the anti-Maoist civilian resistance movement Salwa Judum was launched. The movement was later backed by the government.

In 2007, 436 people, including 200 policemen, died in Maoist violence while the toll was 458 in 2006. The majority of deaths were reported from Bijapur and Dantewada districts.

*Sujeet Kumar* ( © IANS / India eNews)