

Maoists gaining strength, attacks becoming brutal

The attacks by Maoists have become deadlier, ferocious and uglier. The brutal killing of 24 policemen in the jungles of Chhattisgarh by the rebels last week, with bodies mutilated, heads disfigured and corpses stripped of their shoes and socks, is testimony to this.

Details of the repugnant gunbattle in Dantewada district, 480 km south of state capital Raipur, emerged from policemen who had survived and what they described was a perfectly orchestrated ambush by rebels armed with automatic rifles and mortars inside the dense jungle.

'There have been earlier encounters but this seems to be the first time that they (rebels) even chopped off genitals. It was horrid,' said an intelligence official.

Barely had police recovered from this gruesome attack when Maoist rebels wreaked havoc in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh two days later. Around 300 rebels bombed the guesthouse of a government department, destroyed a television relay centre and an electricity substation in Visakhapatnam district.

The rise of the Maoists, numbering not more than 11,000 cadres, has not been due to a brilliant strategy of theirs but because of the sheer vacuum of governance in many parts of India.

Maoist attacks that killed 749 people, including 520 civilians, in India last year have increased this year, signalling that the left extremists have the ability and the resources to attack at will.

Evidence of this was seen in last month's two-day 'economic blockade' which was called by Maoists in six states to protest the setting up of special economic zones (SEZs) and which ended on a violent note, causing losses of well over Rs.1.5 billion to the country's economy.

Although there were only sporadic incidents of violence, the protest crippled normal life in parts of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Bihar and West Bengal, in what was proof of the rebels' clout in impoverished rural areas. In fact, the blockade was an economic disaster, especially in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh that suffered the worst economically. A railway station was torched in West Bengal.

Having seized upon the grievances of peasant farmers and tribal groups directly affected by the Indian government's push to develop SEZs, the rebels have clashed violently with police to hold on to land being acquired for these projects.

A growing dissatisfaction among India's rural community over the move to establish private enclaves conforms to the Maoist agenda of combating exploitation and promoting the creation of a classless society.

The government's response to this spiralling violence has been unfortunately inadequate and, to a great extent, reactive. Though several Maoist insurgency-hit states have promised to combine improved policing with socio-economic measures to defuse grievances that fuel the Maoist cause, it has simply not had its desired objective.

On the development side, the central government claims to have provided Rs.24.75 billion under the

Backward Districts Initiative (BDI) to fill in critical gaps in physical and social development in affected areas.

But despite the best intentions of the government to be sensitive to the tribal populations and help develop these regions, it has only ended having the opposite effect. Instead of helping improve their livelihoods, actions have only intruded the tribal way of life that has affected the environment negatively.

The government must find ways to accommodate this marginalized lot and give them a political voice before the Maoists usurp that space.

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