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Maoist Rebels Widen Deadly Reach Across India

By JIM YARDLEY

BARSUR, India — At the edge of the Indravati River, hundreds of miles from the nearest international border, India effectively ends. Indian paramilitary officers point machine guns across the water. The dense jungles and mountains on the other side belong to Maoist rebels dedicated to overthrowing the government.

“That is their liberated zone,” said P. Bhojak, one of the officers stationed at the river’s edge in this town in the eastern state of Chattisgarh.

Or one piece of it. India’s Maoist rebels are now present in 20 states and have evolved into a potent and lethal insurgency. In the last four years, the Maoists have killed more than 900 Indian security officers, a figure almost as high as the more than 1,100 members of the coalition forces killed in Afghanistan during the same period.

If the Maoists were once dismissed as a ragtag band of outdated ideologues, Indian leaders are now preparing to deploy nearly 70,000 paramilitary officers for a prolonged counterinsurgency campaign to hunt down the guerrillas in some of the country’s most rugged, isolated terrain.

For India, the widening Maoist insurgency is a moment of reckoning for the country’s democracy and has ignited a sharp debate about where it has failed. In the past, India has tamed some secessionist movements by coaxing rebel groups into the country’s big-tent political process. The Maoists, however, do not want to secede or be absorbed. Their goal is to topple the system.

Once considered Robin Hood figures, the Maoists claim to represent the dispossessed of Indian society, particularly the indigenous tribal groups, who suffer some of the country’s highest rates of poverty, illiteracy and [infant mortality](#). Many intellectuals and even some politicians once sympathized with their cause, but the growing Maoist violence has forced a wrenching reconsideration of whether they can still be tolerated.

“The root of this is dispossession and deprivation,” said Ramachandra Guha, a prominent historian based in Bangalore. “The Maoists are an ugly manifestation of this. This is a serious problem that is not going to disappear.”

India's rapid economic growth has made it an emerging global power but also deepened stark inequalities in society. Maoists accuse the government of trying to push tribal groups off their land to gain access to raw materials and have sabotaged roads, bridges and even an energy pipeline.

If the Maoists' political goals seem unattainable, analysts warn they will not be easy to uproot, either.

Here in the state of Chattisgarh, Maoists dominate thousands of square miles of territory and have pushed into neighboring states of Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand and Maharashtra, part of a so-called Red Corridor stretching across central and eastern India.

Violence erupts almost daily. In the past five years, Maoists have detonated more than 1,000 [improvised explosive devices](#) in Chattisgarh. Within the past two weeks, Maoists have burned two schools in Jharkhand, hijacked and later released a passenger train in West Bengal while also carrying out a raid against a West Bengal police station.

Efforts are under way to open peace negotiations, but as yet remain stalemated. With the government offensive drawing closer, the people who feel most at risk are the tribal villagers who live in the forests of Chattisgarh, where the police and Maoists, sometimes called Naxalites, are already skirmishing.

"Earlier," said one villager, "we used to fear the tigers and wild boars. Now we fear the guns of the Naxalites and the police."

The counterinsurgency campaign, called Operation Green Hunt, calls for sending police and paramilitary forces into the jungles to confront the Maoists and drive them out of newer footholds toward remote forest areas where they can be contained.

"It may take one year, two years, three years or four," predicted Vishwa Ranjan, chief of the state police in Chattisgarh, adding that casualties would be inevitable. "There is no zero casualty doctrine," he said.

Once an area is cleared, the plan also calls for introducing development projects such as roads, bridges and schools in hopes of winning support of the tribal people. Also known as adivasis, they have faced decades of exploitation from local officials, moneylenders and private contractors, numerous government reports have found.

"The adivasis are the group least incorporated into India's political economy," said [Ashutosh Varshney](#), an India specialist at Brown University, calling their plight one of the "unfinished quests of Indian democracy."

The Maoist movement first coalesced after a violent 1967 uprising by local Communists over a land dispute in a West Bengal village known as Naxalbari, hence the name Naxalites.

Some Communists would enter the political system; today, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) is an influential political force that holds power in West Bengal. But others went underground, and by the 1980s, many found sanctuary in Chattisgarh, especially in the region across from the Indravati River known as Abhujmad. From here, the Maoists recruited and trained disgruntled tribal villagers and slowly spread out. For years, the central government regarded them as mostly a nuisance. But in 2004, the movement radicalized, authorities say, when its two dominant wings merged with the more violent Communist Party of India (Maoist).

Authorities in Chattisgarh then deputized and armed civilian posses, which have been accused by human rights groups of terrorizing innocent villagers and committing atrocities of their own in the name of hunting Maoists. Now, violence is frequent, if unpredictable, like the ambush near the village of Laheri, in Maharashtra State, carried out by the Maoists on Oct. 8.

That morning, following a tip, a police patrol chased two Maoist fighters and stumbled into a trap. Two hundred Maoists with rifles and machine guns lay waiting and opened fire when the officers came into an exposed area of rice paddies. Seventeen officers died, fighting for hours until they ran out of ammunition.

“They surrounded us from every side,” said Ajay Bhushari, 31, who survived the ambush and is now the commanding officer in Laheri. “They were just stronger. They had more people.”

The Maoists felled trees across the only road leading to the village. The police, already wary of using roads because of improvised explosive devices, marched their reinforcements 10 miles through the jungle, arriving too late at the scene.

Officer Bhushari said violence in the area had risen so sharply that the police now left the fortified defenses of their outpost only in large groups, even for social outings. The Maoists also killed 31 police officers from other nearby outposts in attacks in February and May.

“It’s an open jail for us,” he said. “Either we are sitting here, or we are on patrol. There is nothing else.”

About 40 miles from Laheri, a processing plant owned by Essar Steel has been closed for five months. Maoists sabotaged Essar’s 166-mile underground pipeline, which transfers slurry from one of India’s most coveted iron ore deposits to the Bay of Bengal. “I’ve told my management that I’ll take a team and do the repairs,” said S. Ramesh, the project manager for Essar. “But I can’t promise how long it will last.”

The Essar plant is part of broader undertaking by the government and several private mining companies to extract the resources beneath land teeming with guerrillas. Mr. Ramesh said 70 percent of India’s iron ore lay in states infiltrated by Maoists; production in this area is stalled at 16 million tons a year even though the area has the potential to produce 100 million tons.

Mr. Ramesh fretted that India’s growth would be stunted if the country could not exploit its own natural resources. Yet he also cautioned that the counterinsurgency operation was no cure-all.

“That alone is not going to help,” he said. “We are not fighting an enemy here. We are fighting citizens.”

With police officers dying in large numbers and Maoists carrying out bolder attacks, the debate around the insurgency has sharpened in India’s intellectual salons and on the opinion pages and talk shows.

The writer [Arundhati Roy](#) recently called for unconditional talks and told CNN-IBN that the Maoists were justified in taking up arms because of government oppression. Others who are sympathetic to the plight of the adivasis say the Maoist violence has become intolerable.

“You can’t defend the tactics,” said Mr. Varshney, the Brown University professor. “No modern state can accept attacks on state institutions, even when the state is wrong.”

Local people are caught in the middle. On a recent market day in the village of Palnar, women balancing urns of water on their heads and bare-footed, emaciated men came out of the forests to shop for vegetables, nuts or a rotting fruit fermented to produce local liquor. As peddlers spread their wares over blankets, the nearby government office was locked behind a closed gate.

“It’s a bad situation,” said one villager who asked not to be identified, fearing retribution from both sides. “The Naxalite activities have increased. They have their meetings in the village. They tell the people they have to fight. The people here do not vote out of fear.”

Another man arrived on a motorcycle from a more distant village. Several months ago, the police raided his village and arrested more than a dozen people after accusing them of being collaborators. A few were Maoist sympathizers, the man on the motorcycle said, but most were wrongly swept up in the raid. Now, Operation Green Hunt portends more confrontation.

“Life is very difficult,” the man said. “The Naxalites think we are helping the police. The police think we are helping the Naxalites. We are living in fear over who will kill us first.”

Hari Kumar contributed reporting.

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