India launches major offensive to net Maoist leaders

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NEW DELHI: Thousands of paramilitary personnel have launched a crackdown to target some 50 Maoist leaders across the country in a bid to crush
what is described as India's biggest internal security challenge.

"We would be breaking the neck (of the Maoist movement) by arresting all their senior leaders like Kishenji," a highly placed official in the security establishment said in an interview.

"We believe there could be around 50 such leaders scattered all over. We are targeting them to make the entire movement headless and make a serious dent," the official said.

"With this it would be relatively easy to take on the rest of Maoist guerrillas," the official added, providing for the first time operational details of the coordinated and sweeping security drive.

As of now, operations are under way in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal and Maharashtra -- five states where the outlawed Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist) is most active, mainly among tribals living in remote interiors who are among the poorest of the poor.

The operational methods would, however, differ from the way Sri Lanka's military crushed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last year, it was pointed out.

"We are not going for any operations where innocent lives are put at risk. Do not expect us to launch similar actions in which the LTTE was eliminated. We have our own strategies," said the official who did not want his name and designation to be revealed.

Another official said that a total of 42 battalions from the Border Security Force (BSF), the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) and the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) were involved in the operation.

"Of these five battalions are from BSF, four from ITBP and the rest from CRPF," he said.