

In Villages Across India, Maoist Guerrillas Widen 'People's War'

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BHANUPRATAPUR FOREST RESERVE, [India](#) — The gray light of dawn broke over the bamboo forest as the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army prepared for a new day.

With transistor radios tucked under their arms, the soldiers listened to the morning news and brushed their teeth. A few young recruits busied themselves making a remote-control detonator for explosives.

The company commander, Gopanna Markam, patiently shaved.

"We have made the people aware of how to change your life through armed struggle, not the ballot," said Mr. Markam, who is in his mid-40's, describing his troops' accomplishments. "This is a people's war, a protracted people's war."

Mr. Markam's ragtag forces, who hew to Mao's script for a peasant revolution, fought a seemingly lost cause for so long, they were barely taken seriously beyond India's desperately wanting forest belt. But not anymore.

Today the fighting that Mr. Markam has quietly nurtured for 25 years looks increasingly like a civil war, one claiming more and more lives and slowing the industrial growth of a country hungry for the coal, iron and other riches buried in these isolated realms bypassed by India's economic boom.

While the far more powerful Maoist insurgency in neighboring Nepal has received greater attention, the conflict in India, though largely separate, has gained momentum, too. In the last year, it has cost nearly a thousand lives.

Here in central Chhattisgarh State, the deadliest theater of the war, government-aided village defense forces have lately taken to hunting Maoists in the forests. Hand in hand with the insurgency, the militias have dragged the region into ever more deadly conflict.

Villagers, caught in between, have seen their hamlets burned. Nearly 50,000 are now displaced, living in flimsy tent camps, as the counterinsurgency tries to cleanse the countryside of Maoist support.

The insurgents blow up railway tracks, seize land and chase away forest guards. They have made it virtually impossible for government officials, whose presence here in the hinterland is already patchy, to function. Police posts, government offices and industrial plants are favored targets. Their ultimate goal is to overthrow the state.

Today the Communist Party of India (Maoist), which exists solely as an underground armed movement with no political representation, is a rigidly hierarchical outfit with footholds in 13 of 28 Indian states. It stretches from the tip of India through this east-central state to the northern border with Nepal, where the Maoists have set off full-scale civil war.

Estimates by Indian intelligence officials and Maoist leaders suggest that the rebel ranks in India have swelled to 20,000, though the number is impossible to verify. One senior Indian intelligence official estimated that Maoists exert varying degrees of influence over a quarter of India's 600 districts.

The top government official in one of Chhattisgarh's rural Maoist strongholds, Dantewada, acknowledged that the rebels had made some 60 percent of his 6,400-square-mile district a no man's land for civil servants.

Not that there are many civil servants. His district's police department has a vacancy rate hovering around 35 percent; in health care, it is 20 percent.

A Durable Rebel Movement

The Maoist insurgents are also known in India as Naxalites, after Naxalbari, the town north of Calcutta where an armed Communist rebellion first erupted 38 years ago. It was quickly put down, then quietly reappeared.

Local police forces, with their feeble jeeps and outdated guns, have been largely unable to stanch the rebellion. Nor, students of the conflict argue, is that rebellion likely to vanish soon.

Rather, they say, the Maoists may pose at least as great a challenge to the country's health as the far more talked-about Islamist insurgency in disputed Kashmir.

India offers a most fertile ground: a deep sense of neglect in large swaths of the country and a ballooning youth population, set against the backdrop of economic growth rates of up to 8 percent elsewhere.

The Maoists, meanwhile, survive niftily by extorting taxes from anyone doing business in the forest, from bamboo merchants to road construction companies.

"It is one of the most sustainable anti-state ideologies and movements," argued Ajai Sahni, a security analyst and executive director of the New Delhi-based Institute for Conflict Management.

"Unless something radical is done in terms of a structural revolution in rural areas, you will see a continuous expansion of Maoist insurrection."

Attacks have become more brazen and better coordinated.

Last June, an apparently synchronized set of nine attacks in Bihar State left 21 people dead as Maoists robbed two banks and looted arms from a police station.

In November, also in Bihar, hundreds of Maoist troops orchestrated a jailbreak, freeing more than 300 prisoners and executing nine members of a private militia raised by upper-caste landlords.

In February, here in Chhattisgarh, rebels attacked a warehouse of a state-owned mining company, killing nine security officials and making off with 19 tons of explosives.

Later in February they set off a land mine under a convoy of trucks on a remote country road, instantly killing seven and then, according to wire reports, butchering several others. All told, 28 civilians were killed.

So far this year, the conflict has killed nearly two Indians a day.

The People Fight Back

Chhattisgarh, home to many of India's indigenous people, or adivasis, is most gripped by the war.

Sitting at the bottom of the Indian heap, the adivasis here make a living selling items of value that can be found in the forest: bamboo, leaves to make hand-rolled cigarettes, flowers to distill into country liquor.

They also bear some of the country's worst rates of poverty, health and malnutrition.

But there are riches here, too. Chhattisgarh is negotiating roughly \$1.8 billion in private Indian investment, mostly in mining industries, which the insurgents violently oppose. In the heart of the state, in thick forests of valuable sal trees and bamboo, terror has now spawned terror. Last summer, an anti-Maoist village defense movement was born, calling itself the Salwa Judum, or Peace Mission.

The group has coaxed or hounded thousands of people out of their forest hamlets and into the squalid tent camps, where suspected Maoist sympathizers are detained.

The camps are guarded by police officers, paramilitary forces and squads of local armed youths empowered with the title "special police officer."

The Delhi-based Asian Center for Human Rights, in a report in March, found children in the ranks of the Salwa Judum. The center also accuses the Maoists of recruiting child soldiers. It calls the conflict "the most serious challenge to human rights advocacy in India."

Baman, a resident of a village called Kotrapal, who like many adivasis uses one name, narrated the story of how life had sunk so low.

Last summer the Salwa Judum called a meeting in a neighboring village, where they threatened to beat Baman and others if they did not divulge the names of Maoists and their sympathizers. Baman said he was scared. He named names. He did not care for the Maoists anyway.

Two days later, he was summoned to another meeting, this time by the Maoists. There, he was beaten. Had he refused to attend, Baman said, the Maoists would have simply come to his house and thrashed him. They had already executed a village priest whom they

suspected of being a government informant; Baman said his killers had cut off the priest's ears and left him along the road.

Last September the Salwa Judum, backed by the local police, swept through Kotrapal with a clear message: Move to the camps or face the Salwa Judum's wrath.

"We finished off the village," said Ajay Singh, the Salwa Judum's leader in a nearby town, Bhairamgarh. Then he clarified: "People were excited. Of course they destroyed the houses."

Baman and his clan moved out. Today, Kotrapal, an hour's walk from the nearest country road, is an eerie shell of a village.

Baman pointed out the charred remains of several homes. One was burned by Maoists because they suspected the owner to be a police informant, he said.

Another was burned by the police because they suspected its owner to be the brother of a Maoist.

The school was shuttered. The community hall's doors lay open to the wind. The only signs of life were a few women and children, who were gathering flowers from the forest floor to sell to the country liquor maker.

Before nightfall, they would all to go back to their tent camps.

Salwa Judum leaders say they have waged their campaign with a singular goal in mind: to clear the villages, one by one, and break the Maoists' web of support.

"Unless you cut off the source of disease, the disease will remain," is how the group's most prominent backer, an influential adivasi politician named Mahendra Karma, put it. "The source is the people, the villagers."

There is little doubt that in carrying out its agenda, the Salwa Judum enjoys government support.

State governments are "advised to encourage the formation of local resistance groups," the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs states in its latest annual report.

The Chhattisgarh government has begun to allocate land and money to villagers who agree to abandon their forest homes and build new houses along the road to Bhairamgarh.

It also supports the "special police officers" who work arm in arm with the Salwa Judum.

So far, 5,000 have been trained, given uniforms and offered what counts here as a generous salary, about \$35 a month.

As it lapses deeper into an undeclared state of emergency, Chhattisgarh is now poised to enforce a stringent new law that would allow the local police to detain anyone who belongs to or aids "an unlawful organization" for up to two or three years, without facing a court of law.

A Forced Enthusiasm

Mr. Markam and his Maoist forces appear undaunted. They drill in their forest redoubts. They haul villagers to propaganda meetings. They build their own weapons, including crude pistols and mortars.

To see them in their jungle camp, sleeping on tarpaulins, armed with antiquated rifles and pistols, with no real territory under their full control, it is difficult to fathom how they have maintained their movement for so long, let alone expanded it across such a wide swath of the country.

They sustain themselves on food given by the villagers, plus a share of the annual rice harvest. To speak to people who live in the area is to realize quickly that they have little choice but to comply.

As the forest woke up on this recent morning, the rebels prepared for the next phase of their revolution. Birds began to chatter. A dozen young people practiced song-and-dance routines for an afternoon rally, like cheerleaders marooned in the Indian forest.

A boy in a fighter's uniform, who looked no older than 12, horsed around with a homemade rifle. Mr. Markam said the boy was just visiting.

By late afternoon, with the rally about to get under way, long rows of villagers came up the dirt paths, accompanied by armed Maoist cadres.

Under the wide arms of a mango tree, the cheerleaders sang a version of the "Internationale." They danced with bells around their ankles, promising "people's rule." They denounced the Salwa Judum, chanting "Death to Mahendra Karma."

The audience for the most part sat still, some breaking into giggles only as the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army began military drills, at one point charging ahead with weapons pointed as a hapless chicken scurried across the field.

One man, Maharishi, who was among those who had come on the long afternoon march, said his village had been informed of the rally the night before.

Yes, he said, speaking reluctantly to a stranger, everyone from his village had come. Yes, everyone always comes. "They say you have to come," he said.