

West Bengal Stalinist regime perpetrates peasant massacre

Kranti Kumara
16 March 2007

West Bengal's Left Front government has perpetrated a massacre of peasants opposed to its policy of seizing prime agricultural land for the benefit of Indian and foreign capital.

At least 14 people were killed and some 75 villagers injured Wednesday, when West Bengal's Stalinist-led state government ordered a more than 4,000-strong contingent of police—including para-military, Rapid Action and Combat Commando forces—to reestablish the government's authority in the environs of Nandigram, a town located about 150 kilometers from Kolkata (Calcutta.)

In early January the peasants of Nandigram rose up in revolt after learning of government plans to seize 10,000 acres of land in the area for a Special Economic Zone to be operated by the Indonesian-based Salim Group. On the night of January 6-7, more than 200 Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM] thugs invaded Nandigram, with the tacit support of the police, so as to terrorize the populace and stamp out the opposition movement. Six people died in the ensuing confrontation, but the villagers ultimately chased off the CPM goons.

Until Wednesday the area had remained “out of bounds” to government authorities, with the local populace digging up roads, destroying bridges and building barricades so as to ensure Nandigram remained off limits to government representatives.

From all accounts, Wednesday's clash was a mini civil war. The police entered the area from three different directions and two of the police columns encountered fierce resistance.

Behind a wall of several hundred women and children, thousands of villagers gathered armed with sickles, rods, and scythes. According to some reports some of the villagers were also armed with homemade pipe bombs and country-made pistols.

The police fired teargas and rubber bullets to force the crowds to disperse, but when the villagers fought back, they resorted to firing live-bullets.

Under the headline “Nandigram Bloodied—Killing fields: 11 die in police firing,” the *Hindustan Times* described the police attack as follows: “[As] the villagers started fleeing, policemen followed them and dragged some out of their houses and beat them. ‘It was like a war I don't know where my family members are,’ said Saber, a villager. ‘Bodies were scattered all over the paddy fields smeared with blood. The injured were screaming for help but the policemen kept kicking them.’”

The death toll has since risen to 14 and may well rise again as the police rampage left many critically injured.

Wednesday's police action was planned and ordered by the highest levels of the CPM-led Left Front government. And West Bengal Chief Minister and CPM Politburo member Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, his senior ministers, and the CPM's all-India leadership, are all vociferously defending the storming of Nandigram as necessary to end a “lawless situation in Nandigram”—that is to uphold the authority of the capitalist state—and are excusing the police massacre as “self-defence.”

The claims of self-defence are belied first by the government's decision to order thousands of police clad in battle-gear to invade Nandigram and second by the government's own casualty figures. According to the statement Bhattacharjee made in the West Bengal Assembly Thursday, while 14 villagers were killed and several score injured, only 12 police suffered injuries and “serious and extensive injuries could be avoided as all the policemen were in protective gear.”

While the CPM leadership is justifying the Nandigram massacre with arguments and rhetoric akin to that of any reactionary bourgeois regime, the provocative character and sheer brutality of the Stalinist-ordered police operation has caused it to be condemned by parties and organizations across the political spectrum.

Amnesty International India has called for an independent inquiry into the “excessive use of force at Nandigram” this past week and also into the violence there in January and for the prompt prosecution of all state officials, including police personnel, who are suspected of being responsible for human rights violations, including excessive use of force.

The West Bengal Governor Gopal Krishna Gandhi, an official appointed by the central government, said the killings at Nandigram had filled him “with a sense of cold horror. Was this spilling of human blood not avoidable? [Force] against anti-national elements, terrorists, extremists and insurgents is one thing. The receiving end of the force used in Nandigram does not belong to that order.”

Even the CPM's Left Front allies have had to distance themselves from the West Bengal government's actions. The head of the Revolutionary Socialist Party warned, “This will not only tarnish the image of the Left Front, *but its survival will also be at stake.*” [Emphasis added] Communist Party of India General Secretary A.B. Bardhan described police actions at Nandigram as “brutal” and “unacceptable” and praised Gopal Krishna Gandhi's remarks.

The West Bengal Congress Party leader Manash Bhuniya pounced upon the massacre to call for the imposition of presidential rule in West Bengal. The Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Trinamul (Grassroots) Congress, which have hypocritically been posturing as supporters of West Bengal's peasants in their opposition to the Left Front's land seizure program, have likewise called on the central government to sack the elected state government.

There is little if any chance that India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government will take such a step at this time, and not only because the UPA is dependent on the votes of the 60-plus Left Front MPs for its parliamentary majority.

The Congress Party-led UPA is watching with a mixture of anxiety and admiration the determined drive of West Bengal's Stalinist government to press ahead with its "industrialization" policy—that is the wooing of Indian and foreign investors—in the face of popular opposition.

Like the Left Front in West Bengal, the UPA views the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) as pivotal to its plans to make India a magnet for capital in search of cheap labor.

(The SEZs are an attempt by the Indian ruling elite to duplicate the Chinese government practice of providing investors with land, long-term tax breaks, relaxed environmental and labor regulations and cheap, and highly government-regimented, labor. China's SEZs have attracted hundreds of billions of dollars in investment, enabling the owners of US, Japanese and European transnationals and a narrow layer of Chinese Communist Party and state officials to grow rich through the super-exploitation of a rapidly growing proletariat.)

Only a few days ago, India's prime minister, Manmohan Singh, arguably India's chief advocate of neo-liberal reforms, praised the West Bengal Chief Minister's stubborn focus on attracting capital so as to industrialize his state. "I do sincerely believe," Manmohan Singh told India's lower house of parliament, "that my friend Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee is right when he says time has come to work steadfastly to rapidly industrialize the economy".

While the UPA will not move against West Bengal's CPM-led Left Front government that does not mean it and big business won't cynically use the Left Front's brutal actions on behalf of big business to prod it even further right. The *Times of India* chortled March 15 "that the deaths on Wednesday, as well as at least nine others that took place earlier" will "blunt the moral edge to the party's anti-reforms rhetoric."

The West Bengal government and CPM have claimed that the peasant revolt in West Bengal was stoked by their right-wing and Naxhalite (Maoist) political opponents and that the government never had a conclusive plan to seize land in Nandigram. However no stock can be given to such denials. Indeed, last January's rebellion was sparked when villagers learned that a local government authority had initiated the process of designating land in Nandigram to be given over to the Salim Group to establish a chemical production hub. Furthermore, while Chief Minister Bhattacharjee offered to withdraw the "notification" for land-seizure, he has yet to rescind it in practice.

The Politburo of the CPM in a hurriedly issued a statement sought to blame Wednesday's bloody events on the "Trinamul

[Congress], Naxhalite and other elements"

The main opposition party in West Bengal, the Trinamul Congress makes various right-wing populist appeals that combine vicious anti-communism with Bengali nationalism. A split-off from the Congress, it is an ally of the BJP in national politics.

Undoubtedly the Trinamul Congress is seeking to exploit the grievances of West Bengal's peasants for its own reactionary ends. But it is the CPM and the Left Front who have provided the likes of Mamata Banerjee, the demagogue who leads the Trinamul Congress, with a platform by doing the bidding of the Tatas in expropriating land for a car assembly plant in Singur and of the Salim Group in Nandigram.

Moreover, Wednesday's massacre is the culmination of a series of state attacks, in which the CPM-led Left Front has used British colonial-authored laws to seize land on behalf of big business and to suppress dissent, as well as outright violence

In its statement, the CPM appealed to the very villagers it has brutalized to stand together against so called outside forces ignoring the fact that it is the Left Front government which for the villagers has become the "outsiders".

Bhattacharjee and his fellow Stalinists claim that the villagers of Nandigram, Singur and other places designated for SEZs will benefit from capitalist development.

In fact, as has been shown by the past 15 years of neo-liberal reform in India, capitalist development will strengthen the hold of big business over all aspects of socio-economic life, promote an ever-wider gap between the rich and poor, and increase poverty and economic insecurity.

Moreover, the peasants of Nandigram are well aware that most of them lack the skills to be employed in modern industry and that the monetary compensation offered by the government can be quickly consumed, leaving them with no means of livelihood.

The massacre at Nandigram has shattered the pretensions of the Left Front and the CPM to defend India's workers and toilers and shown them to be agents of domestic and international capital who stand ready to unleash violent state repression against working people.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact