

India: Congress uses lethal violence against Andhra Pradesh land agitation

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The Congress Party-governed south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh has been in political turmoil since the July 28 police attack on demonstrators in Mudigonda, which is located in the district of Khammam some 250 kilometers from the state capital, Hyderabad.

Police opened fire at Mudigonda with automatic weapons killing at least seven people participating in a land agitation being led by the Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India-Marxist or CPI(M) and the Communist Party of India (CPI).

The July 28 demonstration had been called to protest violent police lathi-charges and the arrest of more than one thousand protesters during a state-wide day-of-action in support of land redistribution two days before.

The police have sought to justify their use of lethal violence by claiming that the Mudigonda protesters pelted them with stones. But even right-wing newspapers such as the *Indian Express* have had to concede that the police shot to kill, firing at protesters' heads and torsos, not the ground. It has been reported that among the police forces the Congress state government deployed to Mudigonda were special units created to fight the Naxalites, a Maoist guerrilla movement.

"As on other occasions," declared a July 31 *Indian Express* editorial, "the police have chosen not to follow the rule book. They fired directly into the crowd. Without warning, without exhausting other options such as water cannons or rubber bullets. That such monstrous behaviour by the police is being sought to be justified by Chief Minister Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy and the Congress, is shocking to say the least."

The state's official opposition, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), and the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have joined the CPI(M) and CPI in condemning the police massacre, with most of the

opposition demanding Reddy's resignation as chief minister.

The Politburo of the CPI(M) issued a statement saying the "genuine demands" of the people for house sites and land could not be suppressed by such a "brutal display of force."

Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, whose Congress-led coalition government is dependent on the parliamentary votes of the CPI(M) and its Left Front allies, felt compelled to meet with CPM leaders so as to contain the political fallout from the Mudigonda massacre. But he has refused to condemn the police killings, characterizing the one-sided confrontation an "unfortunate incident."

Not surprisingly, the Congress leadership has rejected outright the call for Reddy's resignation, saying the Stalinists cannot dictate to the Congress the composition of its leadership. "We don't appoint or remove chief ministers at the behest of the Left parties," All-India Congress Committee General Secretary Digvijay Singh told reporters.

In recent months the Stalinist parties have been agitating for the rural landless to be given two acres of land and for housing sites to be given those in the cities without shelter. In many places across the state, government lands have been occupied to press these demands. A CPI(M) report in mid-June, when the agitation was six weeks old, claimed that protests had been mounted in 90 towns and 712 villages. In its editorial on the Mudigonda massacre, the *Indian Express* conceded that "people's participation in the agitation has been growing by the day. This is not surprising considering that the twin demands of two acres of land for the landless and house sites for the urban poor are ... something for which lakhs [hundreds of thousands] of poor people have been craving for

decades."

With the support of the twin Stalinist parties and on the basis of various populist promises, the Congress Party swept to power in Andhra Pradesh in the 2004 state election.

Predictably, most of these, including a promise to redistribute land to the poor, remain unfulfilled. Like the Congress-led national government, the Reddy government in Andhra Pradesh is pressing forward with neo-liberal reform.

A further factor fueling popular anger is the fact that the well-to-do and the well-connected, i.e., politicians and their families, have manipulated previous land reforms, appropriating much valuable land especially in and around greater Hyderabad.

The Congress state government responded to the Stalinist land agitation by pointing to the actions of the West Bengal Left Front government, which has stripped peasants of their land so it can be handed over to Indian and foreign investors in the form of Special Economic Zones. In March, at least 14 peasants were killed when the West Bengal CPI(M)-led Left Front government ordered the police and party thugs to stamp out an anti-SEZ agitation in Nandigram.

There is little doubt that the CPI(M) and CPI have mounted the Andhra Pradesh land agitation in a desperate attempt to refurbish their tattered and blood-stained "left" credentials, as well as to distance themselves from the right-wing Congress state government that they helped to bring to office just three years ago.

While the land agitation has undoubtedly struck a strong popular chord, the Stalinists are using it as a means to renew ties with the TDP, the Telugu regionalist party that from 1998 through May 2004 played a crucial role in propping up India's BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government. Under Chandrababu Naidu, Andhra Pradesh's state government, which fell from power simultaneously with the NDA three years ago, became a darling of the World Bank for its pursuit of neo-liberal policies.

In answering the Congress' attempts to excuse the massacre at Mudigonda, CPI(M) elder statesman Jyoti Basu, once again justified the police assault at Nandigram. "The two incidents are totally different," claimed Basu. While he decried the police shooting at Mudigonda as "unwarranted," Basu maintained that the

police at Nandigram were "forced into opening fire." The truth is in both cases the state government resorted to murderous violence in the hopes of drowning a popular agitation in blood.

In a hearing Tuesday on a TDP public interest litigation seeking a judicial inquiry into the Mudigonda massacre, the Andhra Pradesh High Court sought to lay blame for the wanton police murder of unarmed protesters on the parties that organized the July 28 protest, not the police or the Congress state government that deployed them. Said the court, "Every party which is mandated by the people to sit in the Opposition is organizing strikes and bandhs and provoking violence which at times result in the death of innocent citizens."

Earlier, Congress Chief Minister Reddy announced a compensation package for the families of those killed or injured by the police on July 28. Families of those killed are to be given 500,000 Rupees (about US\$10,000). Jobs and two acres of land have also been promised. Those who suffered serious injury are to be given Rs. 50,000 (\$1,000) and those with less serious bullet wounds Rs. 10,000 (\$200). Two police officers have been suspended.



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