

Indian government to launch major military offensive against Maoist insurgents

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India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government has let it be known that it is about to launch a major, indeed unprecedentedly large, multi-state offensive against Maoist guerrillas. This offensive, which is set to begin next month, will include the deployment, for the first time ever, of Indian Air Force (IAF) units against the Maoist insurgents, who are commonly known in India as the Naxalites.

According to press reports, more than 100,000 federal paramilitary troops—including personnel from the Border Security Force (BSF), Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), and the Central Reserve Police Force's (CRPF) elite COBRA unit—will take part. They will be assisted by the Indian Army's Rashtriya Rifles and the Indian Air Force.

In preparation for the offensive, Home Minister Palaniappan Chidabaram and other central government officials have been holding extensive consultations with state government officials.

Chidambaram visited the adjacent central Indian states of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand in late September to review the preparations for the anti-Maoist offensive. These states, which are amongst India's most economically backward and deprived, are the center of the Naxalite insurgency.

Chidambaram praised Chhattisgarh's government, which is formed by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), for its efforts to combat the Maoists and promised India's central government will "provide all possible help" to the two states "to eradicate the left-wing extremists completely." According to press reports, more than 55,000 troops, including 20,000 newly deployed from elsewhere in India, will be involved in the anti-Naxalite offensive in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand.

Upon its re-election last May, the UPA declared quelling the Naxalite insurgency to be one of its top priorities. The presidential address that inaugurated the new parliamentary session vowed that the government would take "stern measures" to combat "leftwing extremism." Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has himself repeatedly characterized the Maoist insurgency as the "biggest internal security threat" that New Delhi faces and argues that suppression of the insurgency is important for achieving the government's economic development goals. Speaking to a meeting of police chiefs last month, Singh expressed concern that the government is losing the battle with the Naxalites, noting that their insurgency has intensified and spread.

According to Chidambaram, Maoist insurgents are active in 20 states and more than a third of India's administrative districts. Said the Home Minister, "2,000 police station areas in 223 districts ... are partially or substantially affected by Naxalite activity."

Of special concern to India's elite is the emergence of a so-called "red corridor," a large contiguous area of insurgent activity stretching from the India-Nepal border in the north to the northern districts of the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. Much of this area is peopled by tribal groups, whose concerns have traditionally been ignored, and rights trampled on, by the Indian state.

The proposal to involve the Indian Air Force in the anti-Naxalite campaign has caused considerable debate in Indian political and military circles, with some expressing concern that this could rapidly lead to an escalation of the fighting and heavy civilian casualties. Some members of the military establishment have even warned about the potential for an "Afghan" or "Iraq" type situation in which the terror and death caused by indiscriminate air strikes feed the anti-government insurgency.

Initially UPA government spokesmen said Air Force helicopters would be used only for logistical purposes, such as ferrying troops, evacuating casualties, and reconnaissance. But after the Air Force high command objected, the government agreed that the Air Force will be allowed to fire on Naxalite guerrillas in "self-defence."

"We have put up a case before the defence ministry," said Air Chief Marshal P.V. Naik October 1. "It is absolutely important that the Air Force be allowed to fire in self-defence whenever its helicopters or air crew comes under attack." While Vice Chief of Air Staff, Air Marshal P.K. Barborra said on October 14 that the Air Force has yet to receive any official response to its request, Defence Minister A.K. Antony forthrightly declared last weekend that the Air Force will have the right to open fire "during anti-Naxal operations."

"[T]he government should be extremely careful" that the Air Force's role is "only logistical ... nothing else," Mahendra Kumawat, the former director-general of the Border Security Force, told the Kolkata *Telegraph* last month. "And even so," warned Kumawat, "the Naxalites are very capable of trapping the Air Force in ugly situations where they will have no option but to retaliate. Once that begins to happen, there will be the huge risk of collateral damage to populations and further alienation. The Naxalites are clever tacticians, they will engage and scoot; innocent people will get killed. You will have a mess on your hands. Look at what the drone attacks are doing in Afghanistan and Iraq."

The government, added Kumawat, "is going to lose more hearts and minds to the Maoists if it forges ahead with a strike policy that brings nothing but bloodshed and disruption to people in the affected zones. That is going to multiply our problems, not solve them."

Antony's announcement indicates that these concerns have been given short shrift in the rush to crush the Maoist insurgency and assert

the fiat of the Indian state. The *Hindu* quoted an unnamed government official as saying, “You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs,” although he conceded that “if we end up killing many more tribals in the process, there will be problems.”

In preparation for the coming offensive, central and West Bengal security forces have been waging a campaign against a Maoist-supported tribal rebellion in the Lalgarh subdistrict since last June. “Lalgarh is the laboratory for us,” explained Union Home Secretary G.K. Pillai. “This will be reflected in what we are going to do in other Naxal-infested areas like Chhattisgarh.”

The Lalgarh operation, which was preceded by a UPA government and media campaign charging West Bengal’s Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front government with ignoring the Naxalite threat, also had the objective of associating the Stalinist parliamentary parties with the counter-insurgency campaign, so as to give it greater popular legitimacy. And the CPI (M) and its Left Front allies have predictably fallen in line. Last Sunday, West Bengal Chief Minister and CPI (M) Politburo member Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee had a breakfast meeting with Chidambaram to “give final touches” to plans that coordinate West Bengal’s security forces with the UPA’s nationwide anti-Maoist offensive.

The Naxalite insurgency is viewed by the Indian bourgeoisie as an intolerable obstacle to its plans to exploit the minerals, forests, and other natural resources of the remote, predominantly tribal areas where the Naxalites have focused their activity for several decades.

“With the help of central forces, we are bringing back security” in Lalgarh, boasted Nirupam Sen, West Bengal’s ostensibly leftwing Commerce and Industry Minister. “And investors want security.” Lalgarh lies some 15 kilometers from a 10 million ton JSW Steel plant in Salboni and within 100 kilometers of mega-projects being undertaken by Bhushan Steel and the Indian conglomerate Videocon.

The growth of the Maoist insurgency is a damning indictment of bourgeois rule. India’s much vaunted “rise” has been driven by pro-big business policies—corporate tax concessions, social spending cuts, the diversion of state funds from agriculture to the infrastructure projects favored by investors, and the gutting of price supports—that have increased economic insecurity and poverty among the rural and urban poor.

Long the victims of government neglect, tribal peoples and other rural toilers now confront the state-supported attempts of foreign and domestic capital to dispossess them of their resource-rich lands and transform them into cheap labor.

But the spread of the Maoist insurgency is not just a product of ravenous Indian capitalism. The Maoists have been able to gain influence, drawing support from some of the most impoverished of India’s rural toilers, only because the working class has been politically paralyzed by the mainline Stalinist parties—the CPI (M) and the Communist Party of India (CPI). For decades these parties confined the working class to militant trade unionism and parliamentary politics. Over the past two decades, they have emerged as enforcers of the Indian bourgeoisie’s neo-liberal export-led growth strategy. The CPI (M) and CPI have supported a succession of pro-big business Union governments, including the UPA from May 2004 through June 2008, and implemented pro-investor policies in those states where they hold office like West Bengal.

Because the working class has been prevented from advancing a socialist solution to the social crisis produced by Indian capitalism, the door has been opened for the Maoists to channel the legitimate anger of sections of the rural toilers into isolated conflicts with Indian

security forces and politically destructive bloodcurdling acts of revenge against various petty exploiters.

Whilst socialists and the working class must unequivocally oppose the Indian government’s military offensive against the Maoists, as it is aimed at strengthening the capitalist state and pressing forward with the dispossession of sections of the tribal people and other toilers, this in no way implies an iota of support for the retrograde nationalist-Stalinist politics of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) and the other Naxalite groups.

The Naxalites have contributed to the political paralysis of the working class, abandoning it to the woeful political influence of the mainline Stalinist parties and confining it to the role of spectator to a “protracted people’s war” being mounted in the most remote parts of India by guerrilla-cadres, most of whom hail from the urban and rural petty bourgeoisie. For all their “revolutionary” rhetoric, the Naxalites defend the counter-revolutionary politics of the Soviet bureaucracy under Stalin. Like the pre-1962 Communist Party of India, to which they trace their origins, India’s Maoists promote the reactionary Menshevik-Stalinist two-stage theory of revolution, which holds that in countries of belated capitalist development socialists must ally with the “progressive” wing of the bourgeoisie to complete the so-called national revolution.

Thus the Maoists’ “armed struggle” goes hand in hand with all manner of opportunist alliances and maneuvers. Most recently, the Maoists have worked closely with the Trinamul Congress (TMC), a right-wing Bengali regionalist party led by the anti-communist demagogue Mamata Bannerjee. The Naxalites boosted the TMC’s pretensions to be a defender of the oppressed peasantry when it sought to insinuate itself into the leadership of the movement against the pro-investor land expropriations being carried out by the West Bengal government at Nandigram and Singur. And their Lagarh uprising coincided with a TMC campaign to press the Union government to sack West Bengal’s Left Front government on the grounds that law and order had broken down in the state.



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