

# Indian government suffers reversal in its war on Maoists and tribals

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The Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, which has been on the warpath against a spreading Maoist insurgency, has been thrown into a serious crisis following a deadly ambush by Maoist guerrillas on April 6 that killed 76 security personnel in the forests of the eastern state of Chhattisgarh.

The Dantewada ambush is far and away the largest reversal Indian state forces have ever suffered at the hands of the Maoists—who are also known as Naxalites—in the four decades that they have been attempting to develop a “protracted people’s war” based on the peasantry and, more recently, India’s oppressed tribal population.

The UPA considers the Maoist insurgency, which in recent years has spread to more than 200 of the country’s 626 administrative districts, the country’s “greatest internal security threat,” because it stands in the way of the Congress Party’s goal of seizing tribal lands on behalf of domestic and international capital. Soon after winning reelection to a second term in May 2009, the UPA government proclaimed suppression of the Maoist-led tribal insurgency a top priority.

Sections of the tribal population in India’s eastern jungle highlands have turned towards the Maoists out of desperation after enduring decades of repression, displacement and massacres at the hands of the Indian state.

Of the 76 dead, 75 belonged to the Indian government’s paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and one belonged to the Chhattisgarh state police.

Two days after the ambush, Home Minister P. Chidambaram, the chief political architect of the government’s military offensive against the Maoists, offered his resignation in writing. Unsurprisingly, this was promptly rejected by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and by Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi, whom Singh acknowledges as the true head of the UPA government.

The government’s offensive against the Maoists, which has been dubbed Operation Green Hunt, stretches across six states located mainly in the east and involves tens of thousands of heavily-armed central government paramilitaries and the police forces of the six states.

The 80,000 or more paramilitaries that are mounting Operation Green Hunt are receiving logistical support and training in jungle warfare from the Indian army.

There is no doubt that the success of the Dantewada ambush has seriously dented Chidambaram’s swagger and prestige. From the inception of Operation Green Hunt, the Indian Home Ministry has overseen its planning, with Chidambaram playing a major role in both coordinating and publicly promoting the Indian government’s first-ever, nationally-directed, anti-Maoist counterinsurgency offensive.

The *Times of India* observed that Chidambaram’s very public role in promoting Operation Green Hunt had amplified the political fallout from the ambush. “[The] repercussions,” wrote the *Times*, “are far more serious than they would have ordinarily been because of the blunt-speak Chidambaram engaged in to goad states to forge a common front” against the Maoists.

The government was gratified, therefore, that in the wake of the Dantewada ambush the major opposition parties—from the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) through the Left Front—demonstrably rallied round the government and declared their continuing support for the counterinsurgency campaign.

The official opposition BJP generally refuses to cooperate with the UPA government, which it brays against for purportedly being soft on terrorism and coddling India’s impoverished Muslim minority. But in the immediate aftermath of the Dantewada ambush, the BJP rushed to Chidambaram’s defence, hailing him as the best man for taking on the Maoist insurgency.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM], the dominant partner in the Left Front similarly proclaimed its support for Operation Green Hunt and Chidambaram. In the days after the ambush, senior CPM leaders, including party General Secretary Prakash Karat, Politburo member and parliamentarian Sitaram Yechury, and West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee repeatedly endorsed Manmohan Singh’s contention that the Maoist insurgency is the greatest internal threat facing India.

Not long ago the Stalinists were justifying their support for the UPA—the Left Front provided the governing coalition with its parliamentary majority for four years, ending in June 2008—on the grounds that it was the only way to prevent the “communal-fascist” BJP from returning to power. Now they join with the BJP in depicting the Maoist insurgency in veritable Bush “war on terror”-type terms, downplaying, if not outright dismissing, the misery and dispossession of the tribal peoples and the state violence to which they have been subjected.

Particularly noteworthy was Bhattacharjee’s endorsement of

Chidambaram. In early April the Home Minister had publicly reprimanded the West Bengal Chief Minister for the growing political violence in West Bengal, thereby signalling that the UPA government might in the future invoke article 356 of the constitution, which empowers it to place a state in which law and order have broken down under “president’s” or central government rule. The Trinamool Congress, a Bengali regionalist party and the second largest member of the Congress-led UPA coalition, has been campaigning for the imposition of president’s rule in West Bengal since last May’s national election in which it dealt the CPM and Left Front a humiliating electoral defeat.

Still smarting from Chidambaram’s rebuke, Bhattacharjee declared in response to the Dantewada ambush, “This is not a time to blame anyone. It is the time to work together. We must work collectively.”

“Work collectively” in waging war, that is. In an attempt to rally public support for Operation Green Hunt, Chidambaram had previously spoken about the government’s willingness to enter into “peace talks” with the Communist Party of India (Maoist.) Now the ambush is being cited by the political establishment as proof that there can be no talks with “terrorists.”

Indian security forces are notorious for their violations of human rights, including summary executions and torture, but Chidambaram seized on the ambush to proclaim, “This shows the savage nature of the Maoists—the brutality and savagery they are capable of.” Home Secretary G.K. Pillai, giving voice to the ruling elite’s thirst for revenge, vowed that the government would give “a fitting reply” to the Maoists.

The central government has announced that 6,000 more CRPF troops will be mobilized in support of Operation Green Hunt.

Meanwhile, the *Hindu* reports that the people of Mukram, a village of about 50 houses near the ambush site, have fled into the forest for fear of reprisals from CRPF personnel who accuse Mukram’s residents of having provided information to the Maoists that made the ambush possible. The April 12 *Hindu* cited a villager as saying, “Everyone is terrified that the police will take revenge by attacking the village. They have already killed one person.”

The Dantewada ambush has revived discussion within the Indian elite about directly using the Indian armed forces to suppress the Maoist insurgents. Several members of the UPA government including Prime Minister Singh and the Home Minister Chidambaram have told the media “all options are open.”

Although many in the political establishment are pressing for broadening the military’s role in the counterinsurgency campaign, the army and air force chiefs have publicly expressed their opposition to such a course of action.

The recently promoted commander of the Indian Army General Vijay Singh said, “The Naxalite problem is a law and order problem, which is a state subject. It stems from certain issues on the ground, be it of governance, be it of administration, be it of socio-economic factors.”

Similarly the Air Force Chief commented, “The military–Air Force, Army and Navy–are not trained for limited lethality. The weapons that we have are meant for the enemy across the border. Therefore, I am not in favour of use of Air Force in situations like the Naxal problem.”

India’s military top brass fear being drawn into a low intensity war that would sap morale and undermine public support for the military. They also recognize that the militarization of the anti-Maoist campaign could well backfire, with atrocities and repression feeding antigovernment sentiment.

The Dantewada ambush is indicative of the relationship of the Indian bourgeoisie and its state to the tribal peoples. Government officials are viewed as outsiders. Villagers shun contact with them, let alone with armed security personnel.

That said, the Maoist insurgency offers no way forward for the working class and oppressed masses of India. The Naxalites are a politically retrograde nationalist-Stalinist movement that long ago rejected the struggle for the political independence and hegemony of the working class, that is for socialist consciousness. Instead they have made the development of rural-based guerrilla warfare the focus of all their activity.

Like the CPI and CPM to which it traces its origin and whose history it venerates, the CPI (Maoist) claims that the struggle for socialism is not yet on the historical agenda in India. It has combined armed struggle with the promotion of various caste, ethnic and tribal identities and opportunist maneuvers with parties of the bourgeois establishment. In West Bengal the Maoists have aligned themselves with the Trinamool Congress and assisted the efforts of this rightwing split-off from the Congress Party and frequent BJP ally to exploit the growing popular opposition to the West Bengal Left Front government.

In the immediate aftermath of the Dantewada ambush, the Maoists reiterated their call for peace talks with the government.

The recent Naxalite resurgence is attributable to the desperate conditions that prevail in much of rural India, on the one hand, and to the criminal policies being pursued by the Stalinist Left Front, on the other. For decades the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India have subordinated the working class to parliamentary maneuvers with the parties of the Indian elite, becoming in the process an integral part of the political establishment. In the states, such as West Bengal, where they form the government, they are unabashedly pursuing pro-investor policies.

It is because the working class has been prevented from advancing a socialist solution to the social crisis—mobilizing India’s toilers in a struggle to liquidate capitalist rule and thereby liquidating landlordism and casteism and completing the other unresolved problems of the democratic revolution—that the Maoists have temporarily been able to attract support from a section of India’s impoverished tribals.



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