Blood in the Jungle: India’s War Within
By Sunny Peter
In recent years, left-wing extremism in India has spread like a cancer, exploiting the grievances of the poor and leaving a trail of killings that dwarf the chronic unrest in Kashmir. Government efforts to battle the extremism is hampered by India’s complex history of intellectually embracing the left’s advocacy of social justice, writes Sunny Peter. But are the extremists fighting for social justice or the fall of the Indian state itself?

A GROUP OF BURLY young men, camouflaged in army fatigues, run through obstacles as they train at the Counter Terrorism and Jungle Warfare College on a recent day in Chhattisgarh’s Kanker district. They are preparing to take on one of the country’s fiercest enemies in the wilds of eastern India. Their training is vital, as the jungles here have no mercy. One wrong step in the unforgiving terrain could mean death by a landmine or a sniper shot. They must learn to fight the guerrilla enemy on his own terms. The familiar image of a pot-bellied policeman lugging an antiquated weapon won’t do here. The guerrillas are agile, committed and willing to die. It is a war in which everyone seems to be fighting for survival.

With millions of rupees being spent every year on both anti-extremist operations and development in the region, India continues to fight what looks like a losing battle against enemies of the state. Call them left-wing extremists, Maoists or Naxalites; by the government’s own admission, they are the greatest peril the country faces. Describing them as India’s “gravest internal security threat,” Prime Minister Manmohan Singh admitted that the country has not achieved the success it needs in containing this menace. He pointed out that despite counterinsurgency efforts, violence in the affected states continues to rise. Today, the impact of left-wing extremism is felt in at least 223 of the 626 administrative districts in the country. Geographically, that translates into more than one-third of India. Compare this to the figures in 2003, when only 55 districts in nine Indian states were listed as being affected.
by Maoist strife. The spread of the problem is underscored by the fact that the insurgency today affects about 20 out of 28 states with varying degrees of intensity.

In public statements on the matter, the central and state governments have articulated a strong commitment to carry on a two-pronged fight — with a stick in one hand and a carrot in the other. But at the lower echelons of state power, this commitment seems to fade. Many of the soldiers and police on the ground want to get out of these unforgiving jungles.

In August 2009, the Chhattisgarh government dismissed 13 policemen for defying orders to move into Maoist-held territory. The cops refused to enter Madanwara, in Rajnandgaon district, where Maoists had earlier massacred 29 of their colleagues. This is not the first example; 29 constables were earlier suspended in Janjigar-Champa district after they refused to attend a 15-day orientation course at the jungle warfare training center. Instilling the fear of death has worked well for the Maoists. Cherukuri Raj Kumar (who goes by the alias Azad), a spokesman for the Communist Party of India (Maoist) and a member of its Central Committee, told a leading newspaper in January 2010 that he was confident that there would be “demoralization and desertion” among government forces “as they get more bogged down and sucked deeper into the people’s war.” Ironically, Azad was killed in a shootout with security forces in July.

DEEP ROOTS
India’s current left-wing extremism is schematically linked to a communist movement that dates back to the colonial period. The country’s independence from the British was seen by the radical left as at best a transitory phase, and the struggle to establish a people’s government was to continue. India’s communist movement was inspired by the three figureheads of the communist trinity — Marx, Lenin and Mao — despite the ideological differences among them. Driven by the pushes and pulls of argumentative materialism, the movement has witnessed multiple splits, all of them seeking to find a place in India’s proletarian landscape.

It may seem surprising that radical communism found a fertile breeding ground in the jungles of eastern India, turning on its head the traditional Marxist notion that enlightened urban workers would lead the class struggle. The traditionalists’ mistake lay in seeking to replicate a global model of working class revolution in the Indian paradigm. Even as mainstream communist organizations were focusing on mobilizing urban workers, India’s tribal question was mostly neglected. With the departure of the British, however, came a new set of feudal lords who, with the connivance of government officials, began taking over. Direct exploitation of the tribal people started. Gruesome abuse followed as the tribal populations were seen as encroaching on the forest lands that the feudal lords believed were rightfully their own. As the mining industry expanded, large corporations were seen as a band of exploiters, aided...
It is an irony in the history of Indian communism that the turmoil was forcibly put down by the government of West Bengal, which was then headed by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). But by then, the 72 days of rebellion had attracted enormous attention and support, particularly among radical communists across the country. It triggered a flurry of activity among revolutionary elements within communist groups against reactionaries who they felt had hijacked the cause of the proletarian masses.

Communism in India is marked by its internal struggles, and democracy in India has survived under the nose of a Marxist movement striving to overcome its ideological maladjustment to the modern world. When most of India remains oblivious to communist ideology, what makes left wing extremism a cause for “grave concern?” For starters, the number of those killed. The Home Minister has said that nearly 600 civilians were killed in Maoist violence in 2009 alone, double the number of civilians killed in the trouble-torn Kashmir Valley and the country’s restive northeastern states.

The extremists give voice to local demands, taking advantage of feelings of neglect and injustice among the underprivileged and in remote segments of the population. Throughout history and across the world, radical ideologies have succeeded in the absence of good governance. Somewhat of an uneven similarity is found in the spread of the Taliban in the Swat Valley of Pakistan, where the failure of governance was a perceived reason for people to seek the stringent application of Islamic law.

CONTINUING THE STRUGGLE
Since first taking shape, left-wing extremism in India has undergone various dynamic reconfigurations. The most significant event in recent times occurred in 2004, when the Communist Party of India (Maoist) was formed through the merger of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) People’s War Group (PWG) and the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC). The PWG had its operating base in the state of Andhra Pradesh and other peripheral pockets, while the
MCC operated in the state of Bihar and adjoining areas. Intelligence agencies believe that the CPI (Maoist) is today the “most dominant” among the various groups, accounting for more than 90 percent of left-wing extremist incidents and 95 percent of killings. The merger of these two powerful ultra-left parties significantly changed the course of the revolutionary movement, leading to a sudden surge in violence, including the April 6 ambush and massacre of 76 security officers in Chhattisgarh’s Dantewada district and a spate of other recent attacks which followed.

STRANGE COMPLEXITIES
India’s war against ultra-left extremism seems driven by its own internal contradictions. Unlike its efforts to curb terrorism that is sponsored from outside the country, the war against left-wing extremism is often seen as lacking the single-minded commitment of governments both at the center and in the affected states. Rhetoric apart, as the battle rages deep in the jungles, an ideological war continues among the country’s intelligentsia. No one denies that the tribal question has been neglected for far too long; a self-serving nexus of politicians, bureaucrats and corporate entities has crushed the rights of tribal people, the original inhabitants of the land. And no one wants to be seen supporting an oppressive government. Thus, the conflict lies in the fact that, though ideas of development may differ, no democratic government wants to be seen to be fighting its own people. The “grave concern” felt by the government is not about a tribal struggle
for justice that is increasingly seen as legitimate. Rather, it is a fear that left-wing extremism is seeking to overturn the Indian nation itself. The predicament leaves troops on the ground beleaguered and severely exposed. This is what has led the central government to adopt a carrot and stick approach. The Home Ministry’s Annual Report spells out the government’s strategy: “While it is necessary to conduct proactive and sustained operations against the extremists, and put in place all measures required for this, it is also necessary to simultaneously give focused attention to development and governance issues, particularly at the cutting edge level.” To this end, the government has been developing short-term programs, involving activities such as holding health camps, providing drinking water facilities and other basic needs, as well as medium- and long-term measures to promote development on a specific timetable. The government believes this dual approach will go a long way toward eliminating the circumstances that the left-wing extremists are exploiting. However, visibility on the ground continues to be a problem for the government.

But people here live in a strange bind. The government believes that a systematic effort is being made by extremist groups “to prevent the execution and implementation of development works including infrastructure like railways, roads, power and telecom through violence and terror, and to show the governance structures at field levels as being ineffective,” according to the Home Affairs Ministry report. It is a strange predicament, indeed: the very people who motivated the tribal population to take up their struggle today block needed development. It is this left-wing stratagem that lends credence to the belief that the rebels’ goal goes well beyond a mere struggle for tribal development. It is a war to establish a nationwide communist regime.

CONFUSION REIGNS

It is a socio-economic struggle in which no one wants to be seen in the presence of the enemies of the people. Of course, who these enemies are depends on where you stand. Driven by political compulsions, there is an obvious clamor among political parties and social and human rights groups to initiate talks with the extremists. Even the government’s fight against them suffers from a lack of focus, with various state governments pursuing their own individual ways. Many experts believe that India’s turf war against the ultra-left suffers from a set of misguided priorities, misplaced strategies and misadventures. To gain political mileage, state governments and political parties have often presented conflicting perspectives on this war, laying bare the lack of coherence and coordination among various states and the central government. This divergence of views has been seen as the root cause for a bunch of ill-equipped and disheartened paramilitary troops being beaten back every time they move a step forward. States have abruptly halted operations, and diverted funds meant for development activities even as central government initiatives lie in shambles. Some of the worst affected states have been the ones with the most allegations of corruption and nepotism.

As the killing continues, talks with the extremists do not seem likely. The central government says it is willing to talk once the groups renounce violence. The extremists, on the other hand, have laid out a string of demands ranging from the withdrawal of paramilitary forces to the release of their comrades from prison. In such a situation, and at a time when even the suggestion of initiating strong military action invites immediate censure from the politico-intellectual class and retribution in the jungle battle zones, the question obviously arises as to whether the government is even capable of understanding and meeting the demands of the tribal populations from a position of authority. Furthermore, it is important to ask if the Maoists themselves, divided as they are ideologically, are limiting themselves to resolving the tribal question. If they have a wider motive of national revolution, the war is far from over.

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