



by Najeeb Jung

AS THE negotiators get busy with their work, I have no doubt that Collector Alex Paul Menon will soon be released with the government left with no alternative but to concede the demands made.

The Collector has been immature in venturing into the Maoist heartland without adequate security and despite intelligence reports that he was a plausible candidate for kidnapping. His act resulted in the death of two young policemen, both younger than him, and has put the system into paralysis with all efforts now focused on his release.

The critical issue is the immediate need to examine lasting solutions for bringing peace to these areas. Since the general impression seems to be that the Maoists and their sympathisers are determined to commit acts of terror, I wish to highlight the circumstance that has led to the current situation, limiting myself to the situation in Bastar region in Chhattisgarh from where Menon has been taken away. But issues relevant to Bastar are pertinent to other Maoist affected areas also.

Questions

The signals from the government of India and the state government have been confusing. While the Chhattisgarh government has initiated and expedited several development activities over the past few months, the policy of "arrest or kill" and the heavy beefing up of the police and the CRPF arsenal continues. CRPF men are armed with modern weaponry that includes night vision enabled sniper rifles, under barrel grenade launchers, Glock pistols, light weight MP5A Rifles and the old trusted AK47. The basic question is whether this 'carrot and stick' approach will work when fundamental questions of land rights, rights over forest produce, grazing, land re-distribution, preservation of Adivasi culture, and the stench of corruption and exploitation by officers of the revenue, police and forest departments and petty contractors remain unaddressed. Governments continue to approach the problem with the pre-conceived notion that they are the arbiters for the future of the Adivasis and that the development paradigm that is acceptable to them must necessarily suit the Adivasis also.

As much as 98 per cent population of Bastar is Adivasi, living in distant villages and hamlets. The seven major Adivasi tribes of Bastar: Gonds, Muria, Maria, Dhorla, Bhatra, Halba and Dhurra live a life in primitive conditions with agriculture as the main source of income. Because of meagre irrigation facilities, they have adopted shifting agriculture and incomes are exceptionally low. The forest is their life and they often walk miles for drinking water. These are simple people eking out a day-to-day living with virtually zero access to modern medicine.

Since lands have not been clearly demarcated, they are repeatedly harassed and often evicted from lands they have cultivated for years. Their struggle for land rights goes back to the 1930s when forest officials threw out inhabitants from hamlets in the Nagri Tehsil of north Bastar. But the issue was never resolved. Pravir Chandra Bhanj Deo, the Raja of Bastar, was killed by

the state police in 1966, when he agitated the cause of his people. Abujmar in South Bastar remained forbidden territory and till the mid sixties civil servants never ventured there. Sensitive administrators had been so few that today after a gap of almost 40 years the Adivasis remember Collector Dr. B.D. Sharma and have brought him in as negotiator for the current crisis.

The purpose of this piece is neither to criticise the governments nor to speak in favour of the Maoists. At this juncture, it is imperative to examine long-term sustainable solutions. Therefore while appealing to the Maoists to lay down arms, the government must halt the 'arrest or kill' policy. "Operation Haka" or Operation "Green Hunt" must change into "Operation Win Over". A committee of senior officials must look at all cases of arrested persons and examine the release of those against whom there are no major charges.

Mining

It is common knowledge that people are rounded up as an expression of police anger or to strike terror among villagers. This must end. A system of continuous negotiations should be set up, along with track-2 channels to sustain dialogue between both sides. The government must ensure a complete cessation of

mining activity in the area. Large scale mining activity in the region upsets the local rhythm and people believe that rich industrialists are exploiting what rightfully belongs to them.

India's development will not falter if there is no mining in these areas till matters are sorted out.

Measures

High school students from the region should be brought and educated free of cost in colleges in Raipur, Bilaspur, Durg etc. to give them an exposure to city life and given special coaching and training in politics and civil administration to provide them the choice of either assuming a political role or joining state services. The Salwa Judum must be disbanded and local Adivasi boys and girls trained as constables and for other civilian jobs to work in these areas. The majority of government officials who serve in these areas should be from local tribes, specially trained in sensitive administration. Above all, Panchayats must be strengthened so that a young leadership replaces the standard politicians who over the years have tasted the power and glory of the state assembly or Parliament and have developed stakes in status quo.

The process would be long and hard but the government must stay with the task. These people are not foreigners. They are not born terrorists. While some hardline ideologues have penetrated the area, the bulk of the Adivasis retain rare simplicity and are not given to violence. They need confidence, and handholding.

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Lasting steps alone will help



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