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Creeping success against Maoists in India

By Bibhu Prasad Routray

Synopsis

Security forces in India, in spite of several organisational and logistical problems, are making progress against the left-wing extremists. Ultimate success would, however, depend on sustaining the present momentum and effective implementation of the developmental projects.

Commentary

SEVEN MONTHS into Operation Green Hunt, the multi-theatre counter-insurgency military manoeuvre launched in March 2010 against the Maoist extremists in India is showing minor signs of success. While fatalities among the forces and the civilians continue to occur, the government forces are gaining ground in many areas considered to be Maoist strongholds.

Components of the ongoing operations

One of the primary reasons for the recent gain is the initiation of frequent joint operations by security forces operating in different states. Lack of cooperation among states affected by Maoist extremism has been exploited by the extremists for successive years. This is apparently changing. In the past months, security forces operating in the geographically contiguous Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Jharkhand states have started conducting joint operations making movement of Maoists from one state to the other difficult. Such operations have resulted in deaths and arrests of Maoists and cleared large areas of extremist presence.

Raids on the Maoist strongholds (termed 'base areas' in Maoist parlance) in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand are another critical component of the ongoing operations. For a number of years, the vast forested stretches of Abujhmad in Chhattisgarh and Saranda in Jharkhand as well as Orissa state, have provided sanctuary to the extremists. They set up training facilities, arms manufacturing as well as repairing units in these areas. However, this perceived sense of security has been disturbed in view of the forays made by the forces into these areas. In the last week of September, at least 10 Maoists were killed and two camps destroyed in a joint operation by security forces of Jharkhand and Orissa in Saranda forest. A follow-up operation on 9 October in the vicinity of Saranda led to the arrest of senior Maoist explosives expert Nalla Bhikshapati, a member of the Central Technical Committee of the outfit.

Organisational as well as operational weaknesses have crept into the Maoist armed movement, mostly as a result of neutralisation of several of its key leaders in recent years -- a byproduct of a tactical decision taken by

the government to target the Maoist top leadership. The most recent success of the security forces was the killing of Maoist spokesperson Azad in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh in July 2010. According to one count, as many as eight leaders of the Central Committee, the highest decision making body of the CPI-Maoist, have either been killed or arrested in the last two years. In addition, at least two senior leaders have surrendered citing 'health reasons'. In an August 2010 handout, the Maoists admitted that the losses are 'severe' and the neutralised leaders 'irreplaceable'.

Not without costs

Successes for the forces continue to come at some costs. On 4 October, in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district, Maoists detonated an improvised explosive device (IED) in a market place. Four police personnel were killed. Over 50 security force personnel were killed in Maharashtra in 2009. Although, in recent times the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has highlighted Maharashtra as a success story of the security forces' campaign against the Maoists, the extremists continue to carry out occasional ambushes. On 8 October, three para-military personnel were killed in a landmine explosion in Chhattisgarh.

However, these fatalities among the forces can be considered to be an acceptable component of this very large military manoeuvre against the extremists. This is especially so when the forces have fanned out over a large area and are carrying out raids deep inside the Maoist strongholds. As long as large-scale fatalities are avoided, such as the series of attacks in Chhattisgarh in the months of April and May which killed 124 security force personnel, the MHA will have reasons to believe that the operations are continuing in the right direction.

Problems Galore

Multiple problems, though, continue to affect the operations against the extremists. There is continuing weakness among the state police forces in leading the anti-Maoist operations, which results in the dependence of the states on the central para-military forces (CPMFs). There is a lack of coordination between the police and the CPMFs as well as a lack of ground level intelligence. The administration also remains unable to initiate development in areas rescued from the Maoist clutches although these areas need improvement. Union Home Minister P Chidambaram earlier this year had highlighted the 'lack of trust' between the government and the tribal population who constitute the backbone and support base of the Maoists. Slow progress in addressing this problem will continue to have a bearing on the performance of the security forces.

The Maoists are not expected to achieve their objective of capturing state power by 2050. However, to dislodge the Maoists from their areas of domination, the ongoing operations, preferably led by a modernised police force, will have to be sustained over a period of time. More importantly, the reality of erosion of the state's image in the eyes of the tribal population will have to be reversed. Effective implementation of development programmes can help achieve this.

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