

A Pretext to Impose Brutal Repression: the Government's "Offensive" Is a Formula for Bloodshed and Injustice

The Campaign for Survival and Dignity, a national platform of adivasi and forest dwellers' mass organisations from ten States, unequivocally condemns the reported plans for a military "offensive" by the government in the country's major forest and tribal areas. This offensive, ostensibly targeted against the CPI (Maoist), is a smoke screen for an assault against the people, especially adivasis, aimed at suppressing all dissent, all resistance and engineering the takeover of their resources. Certain facts make this clear:

The government tells us that this offensive will make it possible for the "state to function" in these areas and fill the "vacuum of governance." This is grossly misleading. The Indian state is very, very active in these areas, often in its most brutal and violent form. A vivid example is the illegal eviction of more than 3,00,000 families by the Forest Departments a few years ago. Laws have been totally disregarded; Constitutional protections for adivasi rights blatantly ignored and their rights over water, forest and land (jal, jangal, jamin) glaringly violated. Every month an increasing number of people are jailed, beaten and killed by the police. If this is the picture of what "absence" of the state means, people are terrified of what the "presence" of the state will mean. It can only mean converting brutalized governance into militarized rule, a total negation of democracy.

This is not a war over "development." People's struggles in India today are over democracy and dignity - Meaningful development must contribute to strengthening the right of all people to their resources and their production, and thereby to control over their own destiny. For generations, adivasis have fought for their Constitutional rights and entitlements. More recently, mass democratic movements have fought for new laws and policies, such as the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), the Forest Rights Act, the right to work and the right to food, in addition to earlier laws like the Minimum Wages Act, the Restoration of Alienated Lands Acts, and land reform and moneylending laws. These laws make it possible for people to fight for greater control over their lives, their livelihoods, their lands and their forests. However these laws are respected more in the breach; if the government wants "development", let it first stop the blatant disregard of its own laws. Let people determine the path of their own development, in accordance with their rights over their resources and the type of infrastructure they desire. The Constitution itself requires this kind of planning. The claim that "development" can be provided through military force is both absurd and ridiculous.

This war is not about "national security"; it is about 'securing' the interests of global and Indian capital and big business. Any government worried about security would send its troops against mining mafias, the forest mafias, violent vigilante groups like the salwa judum and others. Rather than being curbed, these killers are in fact supported by the police. Have the security forces ever been deployed to defend the people struggling to protect themselves, their forests, their livelihoods and their futures? The answer is no. The notion of "security" being advanced by the government clearly has nothing to do with the people. Rather, it is to enable big business to engage in robbery and expropriation of resources, which they have decided will be one of their main sources of accumulation. Hence, mining, "infrastructure", real estate, land grabbing, all aimed at super-profits, are being projected as "development" needed by the people. Huge amounts of international and government money are being pumped into so-called "forestry projects" which displace people from their lands and destroy biodiversity (even while they are trumpeted as a strategy for climate change). The UPA is rushing into agreements with the US and other imperial countries to throw open mining and land to international exploitation. But where do the forests, land, water and minerals lie? They are found in the forest and tribal areas, where people - some organised under the CPI (Maoist), some organized under democratic movements, some in spontaneous local struggles, some simply fighting in whatever manner they can - are resisting the destruction of their homes, resources and their lives. The "offensive against the Maoists" is only a subterfuge to crush this citizens' resistance and to provide an excuse for more abuse of power, more brutality and more injustice.

The government knows perfectly well that it cannot destroy the CPI (Maoist), or any people's struggle, through military action. How can the armed forces identify who is a "Maoist" and who is not? The use of brute military force will result in the slaughter of thousands of people in prolonged, bloody and brutal guerrilla warfare. This has been the result of every "security offensive" in India's history from Kashmir to Nagaland. So why do this? And why now? Unless the goal has nothing to do with "wiping out the Maoists" and everything to do with having an excuse for the permanent presence of lakhs of troops, arms and equipment in these areas. To protect and serve whom?

Hence the need for fear mongering and hysteria about Maoist "sympathisers" and their "infiltration" into "civil society." The government has a very long history of labeling any form of dissent as "Naxalite" or "Maoist." The Maoists' politics are known; their positions are public; the only secret aspect of their work is their personal identities and military tactics. We who work in these areas do not fear this bogey of "infiltration" in our groups by Maoists, for the different stands taken by our organizations and theirs are clear, and in some areas there are open disputes. This scaremongering is just an excuse to justify a crackdown on all forms of dissent and democratic protest in these areas, a crushing of all people's resistance, and the branding of any questioning, any demand for justice, as "Maoist."

In the final analysis, peace and justice will only come to India's workers, peasants, adivasis, dalits and other oppressed sections through the mass democratic struggle of the people. A democratic struggle requires democratic space. The conversion of a region into a war zone, by anyone, is unacceptable. In the forest areas in particular, there is now a need for a new peace, one that can only be achieved through a genuine democratic dialogue between the political forces involved. For this to happen, this horrific "offensive" must first be called off. If the government really wishes to claim that it is committed to protecting people and their rights, let its actions comply with the requirements of law, justice and democracy.

Bharat Jan Andolan, National Front for Tribal Self Rule, Jangal Adhikar Sangharsh Samiti (Mah), Adivasi Mahasabha (Guj), Adivasi Jangal Janjeevan Andolan (D&NH), Jangal Jameen Jan Andolan (Raj), Madhya Pradesh Jangal Jeevan Adhikar Bachao Andolan, Jan Shakti Sanghatan (Chat), Peoples Alliance for Livelihood Rights, Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha, Orissa Jan Sangharsh Morcha, Campaign for Survival & Dignity (Ori), Orissa Jan Adhikar Morcha, Adivasi Aikya Vedike (AP), Campaign for Survival and Dignity – TN, Bharat Jan Andolan (Jhar).