

WEISS: India's Maoist Insurgency

Military alone won't bring poverty-stricken areas into the 21st century

By Stanley A. Weiss

On Thursday, heavily armed Maoist rebels attacked a police station and the home of a Congress leader in the state of Chhattisgarh in India's heartland. On June 29, they assaulted and killed 26 members of India's Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). The Maoist movement, tens of thousands strong, is active in more than half of India's states, a red ribbon that stretches from the Nepalese border down the Bay of Bengal coast. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh calls the Maoists India's top internal security threat; Home Minister P.

Chidambaram terms Maoism "a graver problem than jihadi terrorism." In U.S. terms, the rebels' geographical reach extends from New York City to Key West, Fla., and Washington, D.C., to Indianapolis.

Yet, even as the U.S.-India strategic partnership expands in areas from security to commerce, the United States and most other nations are unaware that India's Maoists even exist. What is the Maoist insurgency's significance, and what is its solution? Can India's government extinguish the red menace by force, or do the problem's real roots lie deeper?

A bit of history: The Maoists, also known as Naxalites, emerged in 1967 from a peasant protest against land seizures in the West Bengali village of Naxalbari. Today, old land-use conflicts have become increasingly high-stakes, as the poverty-stricken rural states where Naxalites thrive are rich in mineral resources, including 85 percent of India's coal reserves.

Indian novelist Arundhati Roy argues, "What the government calls a Maoist corridor is in fact an MoU-ist corridor" - a reference to the memorandums of understanding signed by major corporations eager to extract and profit from the region's natural wealth. While Ms. Roy and others have been accused of romanticizing the Maoist cause, many Indians acknowledge that tribal communities, long neglected by the state, remain excluded from the political process and left behind in India's race toward prosperity.

Central government officials retort that the Maoists are intent on overthrowing the state and that they terrorize and extort from the marginalized tribal villagers they claim to champion. In recent months, the government has taken increasingly aggressive countermeasures, including deploying more than 50,000 paramilitary forces into Maoist



(AP Photo/Dar Yasin)
Indian policemen run for safety fearing an attack as the body of Abrar Khan, a Kashmiri youth, unseen is brought home for burial in Srinagar, India, Tuesday, July 6, 2010. Government forces fired on hundreds of rock-throwing protesters in Indian Kashmir on Tuesday, killing three and wounding two others as a seven-day curfew was lifted, locals and officials said.

strongholds, aimed at clearing areas of rebels so the rule of law and development can take hold.

But will it work? The government's push has met brazen Maoist reprisal, including an April ambush that killed 76 members of the paramilitary CRPF and allegations of involvement in the May train derailment that killed more than 140 people. Since January, more than 750 people have lost their lives in left-wing violence.

At the state level, too many political officials seem willing to negotiate their own backroom deals.

State police are miserably equipped to take on the enemy within; police presence per capita in Bihar is less than half the national rate. Trapped in the middle, many impoverished tribal villagers are fleeing from their homes, afraid of retribution from rebels or police who believe they are abetting the other side. A poll last fall in key Maoist-affected states found that nearly half of respondents believed the conflict would never end.

If these trends continue, the Naxalite challenge could "seriously erode India's geopolitical momentum," warns New Delhi-based political analyst Subhash Agrawal, by keeping India "pre-occupied and tied down domestically, both money- and attention-wise." Recently, India has explored withdrawing its helicopters from U.N. peacekeeping operations in Africa in order to deploy them internally.

Yet, while the Naxalites are a dangerous dimension of the problem, India's true challenge is greater: Can this diverse country of 1.1 billion people, and thousands of castes and subcastes, carve out an inclusive path to equitable development? Despite India's impressive economic growth, 400 million Indians live below the poverty line, and in the words of director of the National Maritime Foundation Commodore C. Uday Bhaskar, when it comes to tribal communities, "it is shameful but true that the largest democracy has consistently exploited its oldest and most vulnerable constituency."

Yes, India must bring its Maoist rebels to justice through determined security operations, but lasting stability will never be achieved at the point of a gun. Increased bloodshed risks making the red corridor blood red. The answer to India's insurgency is to ensure that the peasants and tribals enjoy the benefits of the 21st century.