

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ambush of a convoy of Congress party leaders in Chhattisgarh on May 25th, 2013, was one of the most ambitious attacks by the Maoists. It was a well-planned attack and shows a complete security and intelligence failure. The Maoists have attained their tactical aim of projecting their power while creating political and moral uncertainty in the state.

The most pressing challenge for the state government is to ensure the sanctity of the electoral process for the forthcoming assembly elections. The political process will have to be shielded from the effects of this Maoist action and consequent reaction of the security forces. While the Indian state cannot shirk from doing everything it needs to do to defeat the Maoists, it must also do everything it can to politically engage and win over the tribals.

The ambush should be analysed in the light of the strategic and political landscape where the Maoists were under duress and parties increasing their reach in the tribal areas. This does not mean that this ambush is a sign of weakness from the Maoists. It could also be a signal of Maoist revival and resurgence for the next stage of conflict in the state.

The immediate response of the government will be to send in additional central paramilitary forces into Bastar region. The other prong of the strategy will be to raise more special forces in the state, modeled on the lines of the Greyhounds in Andhra Pradesh. Both are erroneous propositions. The key to success against the Maoists lies in intelligence-led operations and better policing, and not in reactive combing operations or 'area domination' exercises which further alienate the locals and the tribals.

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## MAOIST AMBUSH AT CHHATTISGARH

### THE DARBA GHAT AMBUSH

More than 30 people were killed by the Maoists on 25 May 2013 when they ambushed a convoy of senior Congress party leaders at Darba Ghat section on Jagdalpur-Sukma national highway in Bastar district of Chhattisgarh. The convoy consisted of around 20 vehicles and 125 persons, including security personnel assigned to the political leaders. Former state home minister and the leader of opposition, Mahendra Kumar Karma<sup>1</sup> and the state chief of the Congress party, Nand Kumar Patel <sup>2</sup> were among those killed by the Maoists while former Union Minister, VC Shukla was critically injured.

#### *Tactical success*

The audacious ambush was well-planned as the movement of the convoy was known to the Maoists. The political leaders were returning from Sukma after holding an election rally as part of the Parivartan Yatra launched by the Congress party in April this year. The elections for the state assembly are scheduled later this year. The timing of the travel, late in the evening, gave the Maoists sufficient time to execute the ambush. The Maoists were thus able to continue till the security personnel ran out of ammunition and were forced to surrender.

The ambush site at Darba Ghat was selected in an isolated area<sup>3</sup> of the highway in mountainous and forested terrain which limited the access of the security forces and the rescue and relief teams.<sup>4</sup> The portion of the highway was blocked by felling of trees. The Maoists first set off an improvised explosive device (IED), which completely destroyed the first vehicle. The Maoists, around 150 in number, opened indiscriminate fire at the convoy, specifically targeting the second, third and fourth vehicle of the convoy.

**The ambush was a complete security and intelligence failure.** Especially when the Maoists had stepped up violence in the Bastar region in the recent

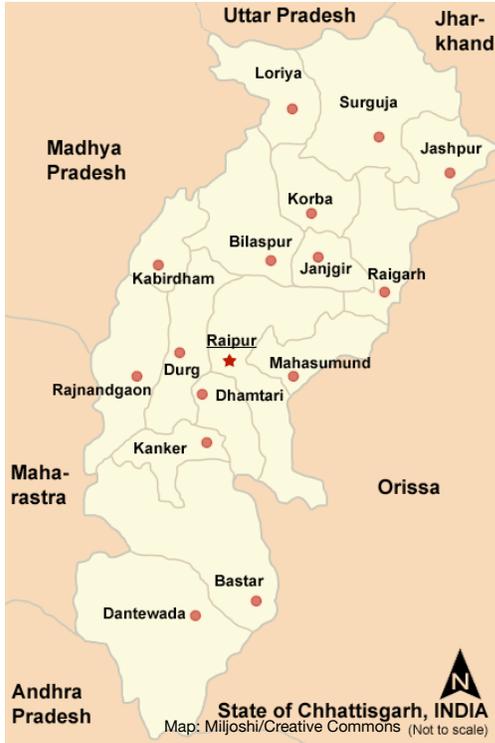
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<sup>1</sup> Karma was the founder of a counter-Maoist vigilante tribal group, Salwa Judum and high on the target list of the Maoists. His son had been earlier killed by the Maoists and he has survived previous attempts on his life, the last one in an IED blast in November 2012.

<sup>2</sup>Patel was also under threat from the Maoists. His convoy had been earlier attacked in Devbhog in July 2011. His son was also killed by the Maoists in this attack.

<sup>3</sup>The area is part of the Jeeram Valley which is estimated to have around 1,500 Maoists.

<sup>4</sup> The first person to reach the ambush site was a journalist, Naresh Mishra. He described the scene to the BBC. ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/hindi/india/2013/05/130525\\_cg\\_naxal\\_witness\\_sm.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/hindi/india/2013/05/130525_cg_naxal_witness_sm.shtml))



weeks.<sup>5</sup> It is understandable that drones and satellite imagery would have limited coverage in the hilly terrain of Darba Ghat, with the dense Kanger forests to its north and the Balimela jungles to its east. But the intelligence branch of the state police has no such excuses for missing the signs of such a well-planned Maoist attack. It is also evident that the standard operating procedures for securing and clearing of roads used by political leadership were not followed, allowing the Maoists to have a free run for nearly two hours.

**The attack has fulfilled the immediate Maoist goal of projecting their power by attracting widespread national and international attention.** The Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh, Raman Singh has cancelled his Vikas Yatra, and the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh and the UPA Chairperson, Sonia Gandhi have visited the state capital. There are reports of more central forces being sent to the state. It will also attract enhanced media coverage in the coming days, thereby pushing the voices of Maoists and their sympathisers to the forefront of national discourse.

*Strategic and political landscape*

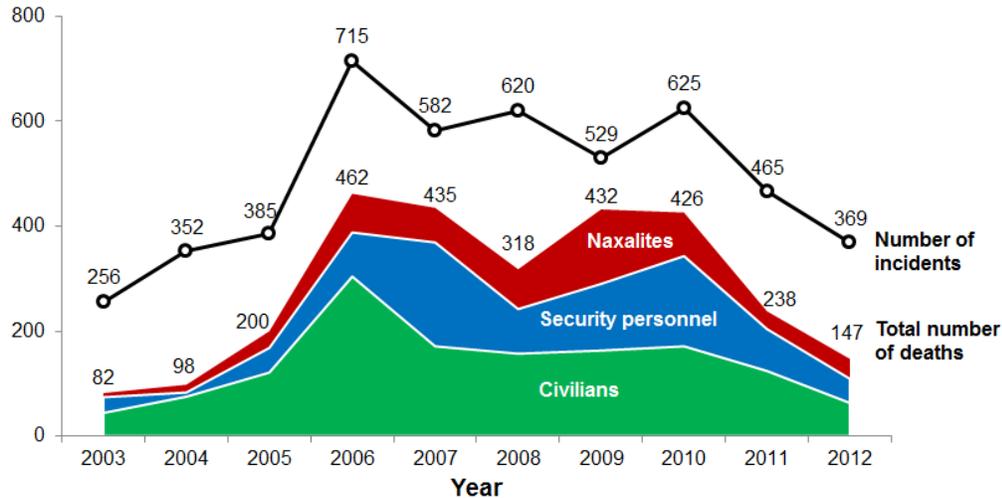
**By most parameters of violence and fatalities, there was a decline in Maoist activity in Chhattisgarh in 2012.** The state recorded only 7 major incidents (involving three or more fatalities) in 2012, as against 13 in 2011. Prior to the Doordarshan incident, no counter-attacks were launched by the Maoists in Chhattisgarh in 2013. Evidently, the losses suffered over the past two years had forced the Maoists into a tactical retreat. (See chart on the following page)

This retreat must be seen in light of the reports that the **Maoists have been under increasing pressure in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Orissa.** It has led to the Maoists consolidating their base in Bastar region. Maoists have avoided pitched battles with the security forces, while targeting the members

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the incidents reflecting this escalation in Bastar region include:  
 May 12: Maoists attacked the Doordarshan Transmission Centre at Marenga village under Parpa Police Station in Bastar District of Chhattisgarh, killing three personnel of the Chhattisgarh Armed Force (CAF) and injuring another. In a second attack on the same day, Maoists opened fire at the camp of the 9th and 13th battalion of CAF at Temelwada village under Dornapal region of Sukma District, killing one CAF trooper.  
 May 8: The Maoists attacked a CAF party and killed one trooper and injured another three in the jungles under the Kistaram Police Station of Sukma District.  
 April 27: A group of around 50 Maoists attacked a joint party of the Police and Border Security Force (BSF) in the jungles in the Tadoti Police Station area of Kanker District and killed two Policemen and injured another two.

## Naxalism related violence and incidents in Chhattisgarh 2003-2012



Data: South Asia Terrorism Portal satp.org

Chart: The Takshashila Institution

of the erstwhile Salwa Judum.<sup>6</sup> Even before Karma's death in Saturday's ambush, **Salwa Judum had been completely defeated both militarily and morally**, with strictures from the Supreme Court and limited political and logistics support.

That the Maoists were under duress was also noted by Sudeep Chakravarti<sup>7</sup>, author of *Red Sun: Travels in Naxalite Country*: "It's almost as if the **Maoist machinery wants to shift the focus away from itself as it collectively licks several deep and festering wounds**. These have been inflicted by sharp losses of leaders, cadres and territory in the past three years, a trend that remains unabated in every Maoist-affected state." The Maoists have also lost many members of their top leadership in the last few years.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, **for the first time in many years, the political parties have been trying to campaign in tribal areas of the state**. In view of the forthcoming elections, the top leaders of the Congress party had hit the road to make frequent visits to Bastar in the last six months.<sup>9</sup> This seems to have unnerved

<sup>6</sup>At least seven civilians associated with Salwa Judum were killed in 2012, as against only one in 2011.

<sup>7</sup>A stealthier, busier Maoist summit, Sudeep Chakravarti, Mint, May 23, 2013

<sup>8</sup> Central level leaders CPI(Maoist), South Asia Terrorism Portal ([http://satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/maoist/documents/papers/Central\\_level\\_leaders\\_CPI-Maoist.htm](http://satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/maoist/documents/papers/Central_level_leaders_CPI-Maoist.htm))

<sup>9</sup> Eye on polls: Cong had stepped up bid to win over Bastar tribals, Indian Express, May 26, 2013

the Maoists who know that keeping the tribals divorced from the democratic political process is essential for sustaining the Maoist movement.

The ambush at Darba Ghat should be analysed in the light of this strategic landscape where the Maoists were under duress. Saturday's ambush had multiple aims: to project power by successfully carrying out a spectacular terror incident; to scare mainstream politicians away from the electoral process; and most importantly, to invite an enhanced (and perhaps, ham-handed and brutal) response from the state.

**This does not mean that this ambush is a sign of weakness from the Maoists.** It is possible that they believe that they have the organisational strength in the Bastar region to survive the next phase of conflict.<sup>10</sup> This thought was also echoed by Rahul Pandita, the author of *Hello, Bastar*: "The current Maoist leadership is fighting its last battle. It knows that after yesterday's incident the State will press the full pedal." **It is unclear whether this will be a short and swift battle, the ambush seen as an act of desperation by the Maoists, or the beginning of a longer war,** with the ambush a signal of Maoist revival and resurgence. That will only be learnt in the coming months.

## **PROGNOSIS**

With Saturday's ambush, the Maoists have succeeded in creating political and moral instability in Chhattisgarh. The governments, both at the centre and the state, have to respond and they will. The obvious response—and indicators already point in that direction—will be to send in additional central paramilitary forces into Bastar region. This response is based principally on political posturing, and not on objective and urgent considerations of strategy and ground realities. The response needs to be calibrated to send the right political message while avoiding the ham-handedness witnessed in such reactions earlier.

With monsoons about to arrive in a few weeks, the Maoists will be in a retreat and the data of falling violence will be used to vindicate the strategy of inducting more central forces. The other prong of the strategy will be to raise

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<sup>10</sup> Media reports indicate that the Maoists has established their own elite training 'institute', Buniyadi Communist Training School (BCTS), in the Dandakaranya forests. This is to create a pool of cadres who can handle tasks related to the Central Committee. The BCTS trains about 30 to 35 recruits in each batch of six month duration, and is believed to have trained four batches since 2009. The fifth batch is reportedly undergoing training in the Dharba area.

more special forces in the state, modelled on the lines of the Greyhounds<sup>11</sup> in Andhra Pradesh. Both are erroneous propositions. They only provide an illusion of greater security.

**The idea that additional central forces and special forces are all that is needed defeat the Maoists in Chhattisgarh is counter-productive.** It is based on a complete misreading of the experience of the successful anti-Maoist campaign in Andhra Pradesh. The results achieved in Andhra Pradesh were due to the comprehensive reinvention of the police and intelligence system in the state. The Greyhounds certainly played a part, but, at best, an important, not a definitive role. The role of the police and the Special Intelligence Branch in Andhra Pradesh in ensuring the success needs to be better understood and replicated.

As long as the general policing apparatus in the state remains dysfunctional and divorced from fighting the Maoist insurgency, and there is no plan to comprehensively develop effective intelligence capabilities, the operations by both central forces and special forces will achieve little. **The key to success lies in intelligence-led operations and better policing, and not in random combing operations or 'area domination' exercises which further alienate the locals and the tribals.**

While developing the intelligence and policing capabilities will take time, **the immediate and the most pressing challenge for the state government is to ensure the sanctity of the electoral process.** The political process will have to be shielded from the effects of this Maoist action and consequent reaction of the security forces. Following Saturday's ambush, political workers are bound to be nervous about their participation in the forthcoming assembly elections. The normalcy of the electoral process will send a strong signal to the larger population about the political will to take on the Maoists. The government must provide robust security to all the parties and their leaders to campaign freely among the tribals. The parties, with the support of their central leaderships, will have to demonstrate that boldness to campaign in a challenging environment. If the state government and the parties fail on this front, the Maoists would have won, perhaps even without firing a single shot.

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<sup>11</sup> The Union Home Ministry is now funding a scheme for the raising of Special Forces in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha and Bihar, "as per the approved guidelines of Greyhounds", with funds earmarked under its Scheme for Special Infrastructure.

**LAST WORD**

**The substantive solution to the problem of tribal dissatisfaction and alienation—distinct from the Maoist goal of overthrowing the Indian state—will come from democratic politics.** The Maoists have exploited the tribal alienation to launch a brutal war against the Indian State. While the Indian State cannot shirk from doing everything it needs to do to defeat the Maoists, it must also do everything it can to politically engage and win over the tribals.