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India must ensure prompt, impartial and thorough investigation into Chhattisgarh killings by security forces

Authorities in India must ensure that any probe into the killing of 20 persons, most of them Adivasis (Indigenous people), by paramilitary forces in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh on the night of 28 June is prompt, impartial and thorough, Amnesty International said.

Two investigations – by a local judicial officer and the paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) – have been ordered into the late night paramilitary shootings at Kotteguda village in Bastar region of the state which is partly controlled by the banned Maoists fighting a seven-year-long armed insurgency.

Reports by a number of media persons who visited the village independently between 29 June and 1 July contradicted earlier claims by the authorities that they had killed 20 Maoist insurgents during a joint operation by the CRPF and the state police. The reports said a majority of the victims – including 17 men, two teenaged boys and a girl – were local Adivasi villagers and suggested that the rest were either Maoists or part of an armed “people’s militia” controlled by the Maoists who fired at the security forces.

An 11-member team from the opposition Congress Party corroborated the reports, and further claimed that the operation was based on incorrect intelligence inputs about substantial Maoist presence in the area and that some of those deaths amounted to extra-judicial executions or unlawful killings of Adivasi villagers. Following this, the CRPF has defended its night-time operation saying it was difficult to ascertain who were firing at them in the darkness.

The reports also quoted the media persons as having seen knife and axe marks on some of the dead bodies awaiting last rites and said four minor girls were also allegedly molested by the CRPF personnel after the operation. Six CRPF personnel and two teenaged boys injured during the attack were being treated at hospitals in nearby towns.

While some villagers also told the media persons that their gathering was to mark the beginning of the annual sowing season, a few others said the Maoists used such meetings to settle local land disputes. A local Maoist leader said at least 15 villagers needed to be treated for bullet injuries but could not go out for fear of attacks by the CRPF personnel who had detained dozens of local youths for interrogation.

Authorities must ensure a prompt, thorough, impartial and independent investigation into the killings and the allegations of molestation of the girls and must act on its findings to take action against anyone responsible for human rights violations.

Amnesty International reminds the Indian authorities that they are obliged to protect the right to life in accordance with India’s obligations under international law. This includes the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which India is a party, as elaborated by standards such as the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials and

the Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials. These standards provide that in law enforcement operations, intentional lethal use of firearms may only be made when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.

The authorities should also ensure prompt medical care for all the injured and award full reparations for any individuals the investigation finds have been victims of human rights violations, as well as their families.

Over the last seven years, Chhattisgarh has witnessed an escalation of violence between the paramilitary forces and the banned Maoists who claim to be fighting, on behalf of the Adivasis and against India's established political order. At least 800 people have been killed and some 30,000 Adivasis continue to be displaced from their villages in the state.

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