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Recent Maoist attack against civilians in Chhattisgarh condemnable; violence could put more civilians at risk: Amnesty International India

The killing of 24 people, including three senior politicians and eight police personnel, in the central India state of Chhattisgarh on 25 May could further escalate violence in the state, putting more civilians - including local Adivasi (Indigenous) communities - at risk, Amnesty International has warned.

“We unequivocally condemn the taking of hostages and murder of civilians in Chhattisgarh, which constitute serious human rights abuses”, said Shashikumar Velath, Director of Programmes at Amnesty International India.

According to the police, around 250 heavily armed Maoists ambushed a convoy of senior leaders of the Congress party on the Jagdalpur-Sukma highway in Bastar, triggered a blast in two vehicles and fired indiscriminately. The attackers shot dead, among other Congress leaders, former Home Minister of the state Mahendra Karma, the state Congress President Nand Kumar Patel and his son Dinesh. Patel and his son were allegedly taken hostage before they were killed. The attack also wounded 33 people, including former Union Minister V. C. Shukla. The police say that one policeman is still missing.

The Communist Party of India (Maoist), an armed opposition group banned by the central government, has claimed responsibility for the attack. In a four page note sent to select media, the group stated that a People's Liberation Guerrilla Army or PLGA detachment had carried out the attack in order to “punish” those who had launched the anti-Maoist *Salwa Judum* civil militia in 2005 and put “anti-people policies” in force in Chhattisgarh.

The letter expressed regret at the death of a few “innocent Congress workers”, but maintained that it was right in targeting a political party. Earlier, the CPI (Maoist) had called for a strike to protest against the killings of eight Adivasi villagers, including three children, by central paramilitary forces on May 17.

Intentionally directed attacks against civilians, and violence to life and person – including murder of all kinds, cruel treatment and torture – go against fundamental principles of humanity, as reflected in international humanitarian law.

“Authorities must conduct a thorough and impartial investigation into the attacks, and bring those suspected of criminal responsibility to trial in fair proceedings without recourse to the death penalty. In doing so, they must ensure that Adivasi communities are protected from discrimination, violence and harassment”, said Shashikumar Velath.

“Both the CPI (Maoist) and state forces must refrain from committing any attacks that could directly or indirectly lead to civilian casualties. Authorities must also take immediate steps to guard against any attacks, including reprisal attacks, which could cause further civilian casualties.”

Mahendra Karma was instrumental in the establishment of the anti-Maoist state-sponsored civil militia, *Salwa Judum*. Following widespread human rights violations, including killings, rape and other crimes of sexual violence, committed by the *Salwa Judum*, India’s Supreme Court in 2011 banned the militia and ordered its disarming. But state authorities incorporated the militia’s 3,000-strong members into an auxiliary police force which is still active.

Over the last eight years, Chhattisgarh has witnessed an escalation of violence between government forces and the Maoists who claim to be fighting on behalf of Adivasis against India’s established political order. The confrontation has seen routine killings, taking of hostages and other attacks against the civilian population. More than 30,000 Adivasis remain forcibly displaced.

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