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**Government Should Respond to Maoist Offer**

We welcome the announcement by the Communist Party of India (Maoist) to observe a ceasefire and enter into talks with the government of India. Given the government's expressed willingness to engage in talks, we hope that this offer will be reciprocated. This necessarily requires an immediate halt to all paramilitary armed offensive operations (commonly known as Operation Green Hunt). It is also imperative that there should be complete cessation of all hostilities by both sides during the currency of the talks.

We are of the view that the central government, and not the state governments, should be the authority to conduct talks as the problem covers various states.

Additionally, the central government should ensure that, while the talks are being held, all memoranda of understanding, if entered into, should be frozen and not implemented; no compulsory acquisition of tribal lands and habitats be undertaken; and tribals should not be displaced. This is because the central government is bound under law to strictly comply with the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution that, among others, safeguards manifold rights of the tribals, including their ownership over land and resources.

We further urge that during the period of the ceasefire and the course of talks, independent teams of observers and human rights groups should not be prevented, by either side, from going to the affected areas.

**Justice Rajindar Sachar, Randhir Singh, B D Sharma, Arundhati Roy, Amit Bhaduri, Manoranjan Mohanty, Prashant Bhushan, Sumit Chakravartty, S A R Geelani** and others.

NEW DELHI

**Talks Only With Broader Sections**

In the light of the recent demands raised by sections of the intelligentsia urging the government to heed the CPI(Maoist) "offer of talks", we insist that "civil society" should rather put pressure on the government to initiate talks with representatives of all struggling popular and adivasi organisations. The CPI(Maoist) cannot be

treated as the sole spokesperson of all the people in the forest and mineral belt, convenient though this may be for the State and for that party. Does the government believe that violent insurgents are the only deserving interlocutors?

There is a common pattern to the emergence of Maoist violence in many areas. First a non-violent mass organisation like the People's Committee against Police Atrocities (PCAPA) in West Bengal or Chasi Muliya Adivasi Sangh (CMAS) in Orissa arises in response to marginalisation, displacement or violence against tribals by the police and paramilitaries. Then the Maoists step in, attempting to take over the movement and giving it a violent turn. The state responds with even more violence, which is directed not only against the Maoists but also against unaffiliated adivasis. At this point, some adivasis join the Maoists in self-defence, their leaders like Chhatradhar Mahato, Lalmohan Tudu, Singanna are either arrested or gunned down in fake encounters and large numbers of unaffiliated adivasis are branded Maoists or Maoist sympathisers and arrested, killed or terrorised by the state. Clearly, Maoist violence in these cases obtains legitimacy because of the unbridled use of force by security forces and violations of the fundamental rights of the local people. On the other hand, the unilateral and doctrinal use of the language of warfare by one armed group obscures the political agency of the ordinary people who have had no say in this declaration. It also tramples on the human rights of the often desperately poor people who are obliged to seek a livelihood in organisations of the state. Furthermore, it is not clear that the CPI(Maoist) actually shares the rejection of this kind of "development" by the people of the area, or whether it only wants to wrest control of this process from the Indian state.

The counter-insurgency operations mounted by the central government in these areas have led to unprecedented bloodshed, massacres of civilian populations and rampant violations of constitutional rights in the area. The central government insists on treating the affected areas as a "war zone", and has shown little inclination towards tackling the huge backlog of tribal oppression that has created fertile ground for such violence. It is also true that whenever the

government has conceded space, the conditions for this have been created by mass movements, not by the military actions of the CPI(Maoist). For example, the decision by the Ministry of Environment and Forests to put on hold the agreements with Vedanta and Posco in Orissa due to their non-compliance with legal requirements for obtaining the consent of local adivasis, comes in the wake of sustained joint struggles by a range of political groupings.

We, therefore, urge all democratic sections to put pressure on the government to ensure that:

- (1) Regardless of whether talks with the Maoists materialise, talks should immediately be initiated with those adivasis who are losing their land; and with representatives of the various mass-based organisations/mass movements, if necessary by securing their release from prison.
- (2) Round-the-clock security from attacks by both Maoists and state-sponsored groups and security personnel be provided to these representatives and their families, as well as to witnesses in cases like the Gompad massacre and their families;
- (3) The grievances voiced by these representatives be treated with the utmost seriousness and addressed as soon as possible.

**Aditya Nigam, Dilip Simeon, Jairus Banaji, Nivedita Menon, Rohini Hensman, Satya Sivaraman, Sumit Sarkar, and Tanika Sarkar**  
NEW DELHI AND MUMBAI

## Violence on Project-Affected People in Himachal Pradesh

On 14 February, activists of the “Saal Ghaati Bachao Sangharsh Morcha” (Save Saal Valley Struggle Front) were subjected to unprovoked and armed attacks by goondas of the contractors of the Hull I hydropower project in Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh. This attack was to scare the people who had opposed this project since 2005 in the two panchayats of Silla Gharat and Jadera, on grounds of their impacts on local environment and livelihoods. The purpose of the attack was to initiate, forcefully, work on the project but it evoked a strong response from the local people of the concerned panchayats, Chamba town as well as people’s organisations and activists from across Himachal Pradesh, manifesting in demonstrations and public

protest actions on 15, 16 and 17 February in Chamba.

On 17 February, more than 500 to 600 protesters representing the morcha and 10 other organisations presented a memorandum to the district collector demanding an immediate judicial inquiry into the incident and scrapping of the proposed Hull hydro projects (both I and II) in the Saal Valley. Despite repeated protests and agitations of the morcha against the projects for the last five years on the grounds that the projects would destroy the Hull Nala (a sub-tributary of the Ravi), which supports irrigation, water mills, fisheries and drinking water needs of Chamba town, both the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress governments have turned a deaf ear to the demands of the people. It is not a question of the goons – the abettors of this violence need to be held. The use of coercive means and violent intimidation by company-hired goons is an indicator of the failure of the administration and government to protect the rights of its people.

This protest will not stop despite the violence. The following organisations have come together to carry on the struggle by forming a joint action and solidarity committee: Himalaya Niti Abhiyan, Seva Himalaya, CITU, AITUC, Sankalp, Vyapar Mandal, Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, Akhil Bharatiya Kisan Sabha, Himalaya Main Aarthik Samajik Samanta ke liye Jan Abhiyan, Lok Vigyan Kendra and others.

**Rattan Chand and Dev Berhotra**  
Saal Ghaati Bachao Sangharsh Morcha  
CHAMBA, HIMACHAL PRADESH

## Vilification of Democratic Organisations

The Delhi police produced its chargesheet against Kobad Ghandy in the Tis Hazari Courts in New Delhi on 18 February. This document has baselessly alleged unlawful activities against a number of individuals and legitimate democratic organisations working in the public domain. These include Darshan Pal of the People’s Democratic Front of India (PDFI), G N Saibaba, a professor with Delhi University, Rona Wilson, Secretary of the Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners (CRPP), Gautam Navlakha of the People’s Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR), PUDR itself, the

People’s Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), the Democratic Students’ Union (DSU), Revolutionary Democratic Front (RDF), the PDFI, the Indian Association of People’s Lawyers (IAPL), Anti-displacement Front (ADF) and the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR; wrongly named in the chargesheet as the Association of Peoples for Democratic Rights).

The APDR, PUDR and PUCL in particular have been solely concerned with safeguarding democratic and civil rights in India for over 30 years, and are internationally reputed for their rigorous and scrupulous approach to these issues. Among the charges against these established and respected organisations is the completely unfounded one that they are playing “a very important role to broaden the base of the [CPI(Maoist)] outfit”. The chargesheet has provided no evidence whatsoever to substantiate its allegations.

These individuals and organisations have been actively and openly working for democratic and civil rights and liberties across the country on issues ranging from displacement, people’s movements and rural destitution to ethnic conflict and custodial deaths. Today, however, they are being targeted in the chargesheet because they have actively protested against “Operation Green Hunt” (OGH). The chargesheet is yet another instance of the State’s attempt to criminalise any resistance or protests against its actions in the areas covered by OGH. It aims to further cramp the already restricted democratic spaces. As the Supreme Court recently observed (with reference to charges against Himanshu Kumar of the Vanvasi Chetna Ashram of being a Maoist sympathiser), in the name of “sympathisers” and “sympathisers of sympathisers” and so on, all criticism and opposition is being stifled.

**PUCL, PUDR, CRPP, Jan Hasthakshep, CPDM, NPMHR, Saheli, Kashipur Solidarity Group** and others

### Letters

EPW now offers its readers an additional page on which they can comment on articles published in the weekly.

Readers are encouraged to contribute short comments to the Letters pages. The letters should be no more than 300 words.