

Brief report of the killing of adivasis by CRPF forces in Bijapur district

An all-India fact-finding team of rights activists belonging to the Coordination of Democratic Rights Organisations (CDRO) visited the area in Bijapur district of Chhattisgarh where 17 adivasis died as a result of firing by CRPF forces on the night of June 28, 2012. The team visited the villages of Sarkeguda, Kottaguda and Rajpenta and elicited information about the events. The following is a brief report of the team. A more detailed report will follow in due course.

All three villages are small settlements located close to each other and in the jurisdiction of the Basaguda police station which is located about a km away. There is a CRPF camp at about three km from the three villages. While Sarkeguda with 25 households and Rajpenta (12 households) are in Korsagudem panchayat, Kottaguda with 30 households is in Cheepurupatti panchayat. Most residents of the three villages belong to the Dorla Koya tribe.

About 60 adivasis of these three villages assembled from around 8 pm on June 28 in an open area between Sarkeguda and Kottaguda. Such meetings where decisions have to be taken collectively are usually held during the night since adivasis are busy with work most of the day. As the sowing season was upcoming, the meeting was held to discuss several issues related to farming including fixing the date for the traditional seed sowing festival known as *bija pondum*- (this was to have taken place a few weeks earlier but was delayed because the pujari who conducts the ritual had died), distribution of land for tilling, lending help to those families who were without cattle, deciding the amount of rent for using the new tractor they had brought and how to raise fish. Arrears of Rs 10,000 due to the adivasis since two years for tendu leaf collection were paid only recently and they also wanted to discuss what use to put it to. It was a fairly cloudy night and visibility was poor. All those in the gathering were adivasi residents of the three villages and unarmed.

While the meeting was going on, a large contingent of CRPF personnel and CoBRA (Commando Battalion for Resolute Action, a specialised anti-naxalite guerilla unit of the CRPF) commandos numbering well over a hundred, cordoned

off the area. According to the villagers, at about 10 pm there was gunfire without any warning. The first burst was from towards the west and it hit three adivasis who died instantly. This was quickly followed by firing from three other directions. Terrified villagers began screaming and running. Most ran towards their respective villages. Some tried to hide in a hay-storing enclosure. Those who were fleeing for their lives were also fired upon. The firing continued for about 30 minutes after which, as if to survey the dead, the CRPF forces fired two flare guns that lit up the area. The forces stayed on in the area.

It was clear to the fact-finding team that a peaceful gathering of adivasis, none of whom carried any firearms, was surrounded by the CRPF and without any warning fired upon indiscriminately. As a result of this firing, 16 adivasis died -- 15 that night and Irpa Suresh (15) in Bijapur hospital the next day. Six of the dead were minors, including a 12 year old girl Kaka Saraswati, daughter of K Rama. She was hit while fleeing towards her house in Kottaguda. Of the other five minors, two -- Kaka Rahul (16) and Madkam Ramvilas (16) -- were studying in class 10 at a school in Basaguda. Both stayed at a hostel in Basaguda and had come home during the summer vacations.

It was plain slaughter that night near Sarkeguda.

According to the villagers, those who did not die from the bullet wounds were killed by the police with axes they picked up from the village itself. Several eyewitnesses from outside the village, including mediapersons who saw the bodies before they were cremated, referred to some of them as having been brutalised with deep hacking cuts on the chests and foreheads.

The 17th victim of this senseless butchery was Irpa Ramesh, husband of I Lachmi and father of three children. After the firing began, he ran and made it to the safety of his house and stepped out at dawn at about 5 am to survey the area. He was fired upon immediately and though he was hit, managed to get back inside his house. The CRPF men followed him in and clobbered him to death with a brick in front of his family members. According to Ramesh's father Irpa Raju, the CRPF men also stole Rs 5,000 from their house. The same night the police also stole Rs 30,000 from Irpa Narayana's house in Rajpenta as well as Rs 2,000 from the house of Madkam Nagesh.

Those killed are:

From Kottaguda:

1. Kaka Saraswati (12), daughter of K Rama
2. Kaka Sammayya (32), farmer, husband of K Nagi.
3. Kaka Rahul (16), student of Class 10 at Basaguda, son of K Narayana.
4. Madkam Ramvilas (16), student of Class 10 at Basaguda and classmate of Kaka Rahul, son of M Butchaiah.
5. Madkam Dileep (17), studied upto Class 8 at Pamed, assists his father M Muttaiah in farming.
6. Irpa Ramesh (30), farmer, husband of I Lachmi, father of three children.
7. Irpa Dinesh (25), farmer, husband of I Janaki, father of four children, is younger brother of Irpa Ramesh.
8. Madkam Nagesh (35), farmer, also a professional dholak player who performed during festivals, husband of M Sammi, father of two children. His wife is pregnant with their third child.
9. Madkam Suresh (30), farmer, husband of M Sammi and father of two children, is younger brother of Madkam Nagesh.
10. Irpa Narayana (45), farmer, husband of I Narsi, father of four children.

From Rajpenta:

11. Irpa Dharmayya (40), farmer, husband of I Bheeme, father of five children.
12. Irpa Suresh (15), studied upto class 5, son of I Chandrayya. Died at Bijapur hospital on June 29.

From Sarkeguda:

13. Sarke Ramanna (25), farmer, husband of S Somulu, father of three children.
14. Apka Meetu (16), son of A Sukhram, helps his father in farming.

15. Korsu Bichem (22), son of K Gutta, worked earlier for a borewell firm at Hyderabad, came home a month ago to help his family in farming.

16. Kunjam Malla (25), farmer, son of K Lakmadu.

17. Madvi Aithu (40), farmer, husband of M Kamli and father of four children.

Six adivasis were injured in the firing. Four of them, Kaka Ramesh (11) and Kaka Parvathi (10), Irpa Chinnakka (40) and Abka Chotu (16) were admitted to hospitals in Bijapur and Jagdalpur and have since returned home after treatment. Madkam Somayya (30) and Kaka Senti (19) were taken to a hospital in Raipur and are still undergoing treatment but are out of danger. Among the injured Kaka Ramesh (13) and his younger sister Kaka Parvathi (11) escaped narrowly. After the firing began, they ran in the direction of their house in Kottaguda and sustained bullet injuries on their left arms. Irpa Munna (26) and Sarka Pullaiah (20) who were also injured were not taken to the hospital by the CRPF. They are being treated with traditional medicine by their fellow adivasis in Sarkeguda and Kottaguda respectively. A few cattle also died in the firing.

The CRPF men camped in the ground that night and took away 15 of the dead to Basaguda the same night and Irpa Ramesh in the morning. Apart from the injured, they also took along with them about 25 villagers who were let off in the evening. The adivasis went to Basaguda the same day and demanded that the bodies be handed over. The police did so towards evening and the villagers performed their funeral the next day. While some were cremated others were buried. The body of Irpa Dinesh was not returned to the village since, according to the police, he was a Maoist. His body was buried near the police station at Basaguda.

Flouting standard norms, the CRPF men not only carried away the bodies but also scooped away the bloodstained ground beneath the bodies. The Bijapur superintendent of police has gone on record saying that “proper post mortem was conducted by a team of doctors at the Basaguda thana and a report is being prepared”. A post mortem has to be conducted at a hospital properly equipped for the routine and not a police thana. Significantly, the villagers are unanimous that no post mortem was carried out, a fact corroborated by several reporters who saw none of the tell-tale marks that show on the body after a post mortem procedure.

The fact-finding team was also told by the villagers that on the morning of the 29th, CRPF men dragged two women to the fields nearby and tore their clothes. Three other women were also abused, beaten up and threatened with rape.

While these are the plain facts, the police establishment -- from the Bijapur SP to high-ranking officials in the CRPF establishment -- have sought to portray this carnage on adivasi civilians as one of a prolonged exchange of fire with dreaded Maoists resulting in the deaths. Injuries sustained by six CRPF and CoBRA commandoes was repeatedly pointed out. These lies were duly parroted by the political class headed by Union Home Minister P Chidambaram. Broadly, the initial assertion was that an "Operation Silger" was planned several weeks ago and three teams of the CRPF and CoBRA personnel had planned to converge in an area where they had "intelligence inputs" of a big Maoist gathering. Even before the CRPF men could reach there, they came upon a congregation at Sarkeguda and before they could verify matters, they were fired upon because of which the CRPF men resorted to firing in "self defence" resulting in the death of many Maoists. According to IG (Operations), CRPF Pankaj Kumar Singh "a full-fledged Maoist training camp was being run there and the arrangements were such that if attacked they could wrap up everything and leave in 10 minutes. We have recovered IED's, lot of literature, polythene tents, solar cells and muzzle loading guns."

This is brazen falsehood to explain away a horrible crime. The plea of self-defence is a favourite invocation by the police and paramilitary forces to explain away extra-judicial killings. The fact-finding team is of the firm opinion that there was no exchange of fire and the firing was completely one-sided, emanating only from the side of the special forces. It was unannounced and unprovoked.

The injuries to six CRPF and CoBRA personnel on that night was repeatedly cited by CRPF officers to buttress their argument of an exchange of fire. The fact-finding team noticed dozens of bullet marks on trees around the area where the adivasis had assembled as well as bullet marks on some houses indicating that the adivasi gathering was fired upon from all directions. It is entirely plausible that the six personnel sustained the injuries because of the firing by their colleagues from the other sides. The villagers themselves are of the firm opinion that the six CRPF and CoBRA men were caught in their own crossfire. All adivasi residents that the fact-finding team spoke to stated emphatically that there were no Maoists present in their gathering and all of those attending the meeting that night were unarmed.

Following reports in the national media that there were a number of civilians, including minors, who were killed, the official version was toned down

but the basic argument of armed Maoist presence at the meeting and a bonafide encounter continues to be insisted upon. The CRPF now says that seven of the deceased -- Madkam Suresh, Madkam Nagesh, Madvi Ayatu, Kaka Sammayya, Korsa Bijje, Madkam Dilip and Irpa Narayana are Maoists and that there are various cases of violence of a serious nature lodged against them in various police stations across Chattisgarh State. In a macabre take on the death of adivasi civilians, Chattisgarh Chief Minister S Raman Singh said that the Maoists had used the adivasis as human shields and therefore were responsible for the death of civilians!

The more intelligent among the security establishment have now launched a discourse about “unfortunate collateral damage” and how that may be minimized in such engagements in future. Pertinently, there was no way that the CRPF and CoBRA men could have made out the presence of armed people in the gathering on a cloudy night and from the distance they were located at -- about 100 metres away. They surrounded the gathering and began firing with murderous abandon. Even if the claim of the CRPF that they were fired upon and were only retaliating is true, there is absolutely no justification whatsoever in unleashing fire on a village gathering.

Over many years, terrible violence has visited the area. In particular after a combination of the police and criminal Salwa Judum vigilante gangs were let loose on the adivasis in south Bastar since 2005. In a six-month long reign of terror, residents of all three villages have faced attacks by Salwa Judum gangs, had their houses looted and burnt as a consequence of which they migrated, many of them to Khammam district in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh. Two adivasis, Madkam Billa and a minor Korse Bheema of Sarkeguda were also killed by the police at the time. In fact, the adivasis had returned about three years ago and were in the process of rebuilding their lives when the June 28 massacre happened.

In many villages of Korseguda and Cheepurupatti panchayats, instances of police harassment abound. While in the earlier phase of State brutality on adivasis, the common word one heard was that the “judum have done this”, now people say “the forces are causing a lot of problem” alluding to the CRPF and other paramilitary and special police that have been pumped into the area in large numbers over the past two years. The forces, they say, come and position themselves near the villages in the night and fire in the air. “They do this to see if any one comes out and runs so as to kill them.” People of Korseguda, Cheepurupatti and other nearby panchayats go to Basaguda to purchase supplies and also sell some of their produce. “But only the women go since the men will

invariably be taken in by the police at Basaguda, questioned, abused, beaten and sometimes detained for weeks on end. The men started staying away after some of them were booked in false cases.”

As the fact-finding team was approaching the three villages, we saw several groups of heavily armed CRPF men in the forest. They viewed us suspiciously but did not intervene in any manner. They were present when the team was on its way back several hours later. Their presence, after having been responsible for the blood-shed a week ago, works against normal and fearless functioning of life in the area. Referring to the announcement by the Chattisgarh government of a judicial enquiry by a sitting High Court judge into the incident, the adivasis said it would only have any meaning if the enquiry was held in the village itself.

Amidst this inhumanity, there was in evidence a heartening defiance among the adivasis. Unlike during the horrendous mayhem of the early salwa judum, the adivasis are not considering leaving their villages anymore. Instead, there is a strong sense of the injustice done to them and an urge for redressal. The fact-finding team was witness to relief sent by the government being rejected outright. The SDM of Bhoopalapatnam RA Kuruvanshi had arrived in several vehicles with supplies of rice, dal, clothes and some utensils. Angry villagers virtually shouted him and other officials out of Kotteguda. “You kill our children and now you want to help?” “We are maoists are we not? Have you come here to give Maoists these supplies?”

The fact-finding team is of the opinion that the mowing down of 17 adivasis on June 28 is a fall-out of the current counter-insurgency strategy of the government in its fight against the Maoists. In Chattisgarh, time and again this has meant that adivasis perceived of being the support base of the Maoists are being deliberately targeted and subjected to terrible violence. This is an unacceptable violation of the right to life and liberty. Functionaries of the Central and State governments keep stating from time to time that Maoism is not merely a law and order problem but as one having strong socio-economic roots. However, in practice Maoism is being treated as nothing but an outbreak of mere criminality and deployment of killer security forces is seen as the only solution. This policy of brutal suppression must end. It is not our case that the police must turn a blind eye to violence by the Maoists. The police must carry out the task of prevention and investigation of crime but they must do so fully respecting people’s rights and must function strictly within the ambit of the law. The government should implement a policy which seriously addresses issues of social and economic deprivation. It must stop treating the law of the land and the Constitution with contempt. Governments

must adopt a political approach to the Maoists in place of the policy of violent suppression that has been the State's principal response all these many years.

Demands:

1. All CRPF and CoBRA personnel who participated in the operation near Sarkeguda village on the night June 28 must be must be charged under Section 302 of IPC relating to murder and other relevant provisions of the penal code as well as under the SC, ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 and prosecuted.
2. The investigation into these cases must be handed over to the CBI or a criminal investigation team under the aegis of the National Human Rights Commission.
3. The Central and State governments must stop the ongoing policy of trying to brutally suppress the Maoists and must address that movement politically.
4. Governments must respect the Fifth Schedule mandate in letter and spirit and the adivasis' right to land, forest and other natural resources in their region. Protective legislation for the adivasis must be sincerely implemented.

Members of the Fact-finding team:

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4. R Shiva Shankar, Nellore district secretary of the Organisation for Protection of Democratic Rights (OPDR) and B Ram Reddy, OPDR Warangal district convener.
5. C Chandrasekhar, State general secretary of Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC), V Chittibabu and D Suresh Kumar State vice-presidents, N Srimanarayana and R Rajanandam State joint secretaries, Gunti Ravi State committee member and Balakrishna and Muralikrishna, members of Kurnool district of APCLC.

6. VS Krishna, State general secretary of Human Rights Forum (HRF), SK Khadar Babu and D Adinarayana, HRF president and general secretary, Khammam district.

AFDR, APDR, PUDR, OPDR, APCLC and HRF are member organisations of CDRO.

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