

DEALING WITH NAXALISM

• By Dr. M.N. Buch

There are four occasions on which, when Sri Lanka was trying to move from authoritarian rule to democracy, I had the opportunity of being appointed one of the international observers for the Sri Lanka elections, at the national, provincial and local government levels. I saw all the districts of Sri Lanka except Jaffna, Mullaitivu and Mannar. I was thus able to observe what LTTE was doing to that country after IPKF withdrew from Sri Lanka. NN Jha was High Commissioner, followed by Naresh Dayal. As an international observer I was given the facility and the freedom to move freely and to meet a wide cross-section of people.

IPKF went into battle with the Nagaland / Kashmir militancy as its fixation. LTTE, on the other hand, had no hang-ups and was extremely innovative in designing its own form of warfare. Especially against IPKF, Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) generally triggered by remote control, were a favourite weapon, accompanied by well-laid ambushes which targeted troops disoriented by the explosions. LTTE inflicted very high casualties in terms of dead and wounded and it is only when the Indian army fine-tuned its tactics to handle the new kind of warfare that it was able to overcome LTTE.

I have made the above statement by way of a background for what is happening in the Naxalite infested areas, especially Bastar Division in Chhatisgarh. The area is heavily afforested and in South Bastar population is sparse, habitations widely separated by forests and mobility is very limited. The administrative presence in South Bastar hitherto has been very thin and it is only recently that police presence has increased. Because of the Baildilla Project there has been environmental damage and displacement of tribals, who have neither been trained nor educated to participate in the new mining and other related activities. In terms of schools, hospitals, roads, telecommunications, employment opportunities the area lags behind the rest of India by a factor of something like 1:100. Agriculture is rain fed, inputs are meagre, productivity is low and there is considerable exploitation of villagers by traders in the weekly markets and, what is worse, political penetration by organised parties is abysmal. Despite this I am convinced that militant Naxalism is not a homegrown product and there is considerable infiltration by Naxalites from Andhra Pradesh, etc.

Our response to the emerging situation is spasmodic, ad hoc, ill informed and weak. L.K. Joshi, IAS, was the last Commissioner of Bastar who really reached out to the people. The formation of the new State of Chhatisgarh has been an absolute disaster because that State does not have the manpower resources to manage Bastar anywhere near what the larger State of Madhya Pradesh had. In fact the formation of small new States, which are politically incestuous, has been a very unwise move, leading to the unstable situation in Jharkhand, the ineptitude of government in Chhatisgarh, the political anarchy in Haryana and militancy in the Punjab. That, however, is a separate issue and should be dealt with accordingly. The purpose of my present paper is to try and bring to the notice of government that the present tactics of the Naxalites in Bastar are very similar to what LTTE did in Sri Lanka till the Sri Lankan Army ultimately crushed the movement. The terrorists reconnoitre the area, prepare ambush sites, lay explosives, entice the police to walk into the trap, explode the mines and as the police runs from the vehicles for shelter, use a hail of small arms fire to kill the policemen. Every successful ambush demoralises the police and brings new recruits to the Naxalites. The situation as unfolding will soon see the police disintegrating.

Throughout the Naxalite affected area we have to establish fortified police stations, with a clear line of fire, sufficient manpower and an adequate number of automatic weapons to be able to repulse any

Naxalite attack. These police stations must be the point from which strong police patrols penetrate the area, spend time in the villages and try and win over the local people. Every such patrol must have with it a revenue officer, a forest officer, an officer responsible for development issues and a doctor. The patrol then becomes a spearhead for both law and order and normal administration. All movement must be according to a drill which enables the police party to look for signs of ambush and it should have enough strength to be able to make an ambush unsuccessful. This would include weapons such as mortars, RPGs and rocket launchers such as the Carl Gustav which can bring down high explosive on the ambushers and break the ambush.

We also have to establish a sufficiency of camps for armed police which become the points from which large scale strikes can be carried out against the Naxalite Dalams. These camps would have assault groups which could lay ambushes, carry out effective strikes on Naxalite strongholds and generally develop an overwhelming security presence in an area in which at present the Naxalites rule. These assault groups must have armoured personnel carriers which give the police overwhelming firepower and certainly there has to be adequate helicopter back up. These must be armed helicopters so that from land and air the Naxalites are made to feel the heat.

At present I would still call the conflict low intensity. However, the way things are going it can build into something very big because the weapons strength of the Naxalites is increasing and the day is not far when the Naxalites will acquire heavy weaponry. That is how LTTE worked and there is reason to believe that the Maoists in Nepal, remnants of LTTE in Sri Lanka and Jihadi fundamentalists will be only too happy to supply weapons to the Naxalites. Can we allow the situation to deteriorate into something resembling Sri Lanka? If that happens we shall to have to fight a bloody civil war, just like the Sri Lankans. Can India afford a civil war in its very heartland? Harsh steps now with no punches pulled will keep the conflict level at low intensity. Any hesitation on the part of government will raise the level of conflict and Central India will reverberate to the sound of artillery and not only the crackling of small arms fire.
