

Hostage! Hostage! Hostage!

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

Naxalites, Maoists, Left Wing Extremists call them what will, (for convenience I shall call them Naxalite) have virtually taken over about 160 districts of India. That covers more than a quarter of the whole country. All of these are located in the heart of India ---Chhattisgrah, Jharkhand, Eastern Bihar, parts of West Bengal, South Eastern Maharashtra, South Western M.P, Orissa and North Western Andhra Pradesh. In Andhra Pradesh in the Telangana Region the administration and the police, by forceful action, have been able to regain control and the Naxalites are on the run from there. In Chhattisgrah, Orissa and South Eastern Maharashtra, however, the Naxalites reign supreme.

There is a group of so-called liberal activists, of whom Arundhati Roy and B.D. Sharma also claim to be supporters who look upon the Naxalites not as terrorists but as people who are leading a revolution against a heartless, capitalist, anti-people and anti-tribal State and, therefore, they refer to the movement as a war of liberation. How is this war fought? Certainly not by the Geneva Convention. It is fought through terror in which the first victim is the innocent tribal villager who at the point of a gun is made to accept the Naxalites as leaders. It is fought by targeting police officers and government servants doing their duty, it is fought by blowing up school buildings, it is fought by putting an end to all development works, it is fought by trying to destroy every democratic institution, especially the Panchayat Raj institutions. It is fought by blackmail and by extortion in that those persons going about their normal business in these districts, or contractors who have taken the risk of constructing development works such as roads, are forced to pay large sums of money to the Naxalites in order to do business or to undertake the construction work. In Dantewada District a road contractor from Nagpur was made to pay Rs. 20 lakh, which he did. Another dalam which had not got money demanded a similar amount and when he refused payment for a second time he was shot dead. His very courageous widow came from Nagpur and fought the Naxalites on this and one of the dalams apologised. The details of the case are available with me but for security reasons are not being revealed in this article. Bus operators can travel only on those routes and at those times which the Naxalites permit. Even the poorest villager has to pay his tithe to the Naxalites in order to survive. People who deny education to the citizens, who hamper medical care by not allowing primary health centres to function, who disallow development works so that there can be no upliftment can hardly call themselves warriors for the rights of the people. I see very little difference between these bands of Naxalites and the criminals who form the gangs in Mumbai owing allegiance to Dawood Ibrahim and Chhota Rajan. These are harsh words but unfortunately they are true because it is time we recognise the Naxalites for what they really are --- common criminals.

Who else would go to a village in Ghadchiroli District of Maharashtra and decapitate two villagers and abduct ten others? The latest tactics of the Naxalites is abduction of senior government servants and politicians, to be used as hostages for having their demands met. The demands always relate to release of hardcore Naxalites accused of specific crimes, including murder with a view to ensuring that they evade justice. The latest in this series is the abduction of Alex Paul Menon, the Collector and District Magistrate of Sukma in Chhattisgarh. Sukma was the southern most tehsil of the then Bastar District, which was recently constituted into a separate district. Alex is a proactive officer, who extensively toured the district and tried to make the civil administration effective. What do the Naxalites do? In a village where he was addressing a Panchayat sammelan they murdered his two security officers and then abducted him. It is an utter disgrace that large bands of armed men can roam about without being detected, abduct senior officers and then hold them hostages.

It is about time that this nation woke up to the fact that the situation in the Naxalite hit districts is worse than in Nagaland and Mizoram at the height of insurgency. There neither the army nor the police withdrew, they brought rebels to encounter and proved to them that insurgency cannot defeat the Indian State. In the Naxalite hit districts the State has virtually withdrew. It is about time that we reestablished the writ of the State in these districts. Chidambaram talks about development as the answer to Naxalism. Development is possible only in an environment of peace and security and, therefore, till order is restored there can be no development. The Home Ministry does not understand the seriousness of the situation.

The Naxalite hit areas need to be swept clean of terrorists. The government must say very categorically that there will be no negotiation on hostages, that murder will be treated as an offence under section 302 IPC and that order will be restored very quickly. A few suggestions here are:-

1. If need be we should be prepared to lose hostages, but the retaliatory strike must be swift, deadly and highly effective.
2. All police stations must be fortified, made impregnable to attack and used as launch pads for patrols, sorties and raids against specified targets.
3. The police must be strengthened, armed, equipped and trained so that it can take on any attacking Naxalite dalam.
4. There should be no hesitation in using air support, especially armed helicopter.
5. A corps level exercise should be mounted with a view to sweeping the target area and forcing terrorists to flee. They should then be driven on to the security forces, mainly police, waiting in ambush and liquidated. Normally the Naxalites would not attack the army but if they are foolish enough to do so they will suffer the consequences. The main point is that the day an entire dalam is wiped out and heavy casualty inflicted police morale will rise and the recruitment base of the Naxalites will shrink. Once order is restored let us put our best officials into the area and bring genuine, assimilable development to these backward districts.
