

*Maoist Abductions in Chhattisgarh:
Lack of policy guidelines for dealing with such situations*

Sankar Sen, IPS (Retd.)
sankarsen_ips@yahoo.com
*Senior Fellow, Institute of Social Sciences
Former Director General, National Human Rights Commission
Former Director, National Police Academy*

Alex Paul Menon, the abducted Collector of Chhattisgarh's Sukma district, has been released by the Maoists. They have demanded the release of eight of their diehard comrades along with nine other associate members. Criminal cases are pending against some of the jailed extremists. They have also demanded that search and combing operations in Bastar region must stop.

The government will form a committee to take a call on the demands. It needs to be circumspect – the Maoists should not get the message that abduction pays off. Hostage-taking is now a common strategy of the terrorists not merely in Chhattisgarh and Odisha but abroad as well. The abductors get immediate and extensive publicity, which is what they seek. Equally, the government's response comes under scrutiny. In Odisha the Maoists abducted the BJD MLA Jhina Hikaka. Before freeing him, the extremists claimed that the tribal leader had given them an undertaking that he would resign from the Assembly. They also demanded release of several Maoists.

The Left radicals have realized that abduction of important functionaries of the government is a convenient method to ratchet

up the pressure on the State authorities. And the gambit is paying dividends.

The kidnapping of Alex Paul Menon exposes the inherent fault lines of counter-terrorist operations in the hotbed of Maoist insurgency. The field officers, most importantly the senior cadres, will have to be very careful and vigilant about their personal security. Menon who had gone to preside over a farmers' meeting at a Maoist stronghold, was accompanied by only two security guards. Both of them were killed by the extremists. It was an injudicious decision which put the state government in a Catch-22 situation.

Well-meaning young officers like Menon feel that adequate security cover, as laid down by the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), will hinder their movements in the interior areas and hamper their work among the tribals. But travelling without adequate security cover can be hazardous and counter-productive and will only help the Maoists to carry out their sinister designs. Last year, they had abducted the Collector of Odisha's Malkangiri district. Clearly they are targeting the head of the district administration, and not the junior functionaries. It becomes easier to hit the headlines and engage in hard bargaining with the State authorities.

There are no clear-cut guidelines before the government on how to tackle abductions. It would be useful to recall that after the Olympic tragedy in Munich on 5 September, 1972, in which eleven

Israeli athletes were killed, the New York Police formulated elaborate guidelines to deal with this new form of criminality. It feared that similar confrontations might occur in New York City, the headquarters of the United Nations. The New York Plan, so called, has been used effectively across the USA and Canada.

Both in Odisha and Chhattisgarh, the state government had nominated former civil servants to negotiate with the Maoists. The problem is that they are not trained in the art of hostage negotiations. They may not be able to bargain properly and may be overwhelmed by the tension that can persist for days. To engage friends of the hostages or civil servants as negotiators is fraught with considerable risk.

The Union Home Ministry plans to write to the states, seeking their views on formulating an SOP to deal with such situations. It will lay down the course of action for the states and the points on which they can yield to concede the demands of the Maoists. One of the principles of negotiations with the terrorists is never to offer a concession unless the government gets something in return.

Certain demands are non-negotiable, and these include weapons, drugs and exchange of hostages or trade-offs. Such exchanges tend to influence the relationship between the captors and the hostages. This is known as “Stockholm syndrome” (named after such an incident which occurred in a Stockholm bank in

August 1973). In the course of time, it becomes difficult for the terrorists to view the hostages as impersonal pawns and they feel concerned about the welfare of the hostages.

There are instances of the terrorists killing the hostages on the expiry of the deadline. They know that such mayhem can ignite public anger against the abductors and erode their support base. Certain pro-Maoist intellectuals notably Dr. Binayak Sen, have criticized the abduction of Menon.

Operations against the Maoists have suffered because of the absence of a national approach. There is no consensus between the Centre and the States. Divergent, even incongruous approaches are often followed by the states. It is evident that capitulation to Maoist demands on Odisha and Jharkhand has made abductions an extremely useful and rewarding tactic. It has now, however, succeeded in Andhra Pradesh because of the state government's non-sense stand.

A tough policy can be adopted by a government which is confident of its abilities, one that will not succumb to stress and strain. The Maoists will try out this tactic yet again; any state will suffer a tremendous loss of credibility if it ultimately submits to extortion.

Central to these high profile cases is the miserable condition and horrifying exploitation of the tribals and the need for urgent steps to set things right. But the strategy of development as a tool to counter the Maoist influence will not succeed without neutralizing the extremist control and firepower in that area. Maoists have now developed a vested interest in stalling development with a view to perpetuating their stranglehold over the region.
