

‘War or Peace?’

There is political reality, and then there is ground reality. As the anti-Maoist meet convened by Union Home Minister P Chidambaram in Kolkata on February 9 proved, the two do not always square. While the chief minister of Bihar, Mr Nitish Kumar and the redoubtable Shibu Soren, chief minister of Jharkhand stayed away from the meeting, apparently for no major reasons, the chief ministers of Orissa and West Bengal saved the occasion by making the all-important conclave, otherwise hugely publicised, a “grand success”. They agreed on “inter-state operations”—as if there was anything new in it — and, Mr Chidambaram hoped, not against hope, to reclaim some of the Naxal-dominated areas in the next six months.

This moment is the moment of despair within the existing system. This is the moment at which it becomes clear to the populace that the ruling elites can no longer sell their democratic dreams. For all practical purposes “operations against naxalites are already on, and now the operations will be conducted in a major way”. So said the IG police (Ranchi Zone) the other day. The CPI (Maoist) in their press release of February 2 elaborated how joint operations would only kill many more people to pave the way for creating more base areas. But oppression doesn’t necessarily produce resistance. Nor do starvation deaths in a near famine situation create mass uprisings. What is happening in the name of combating naxalites is awful and monotonous as well. The enormity of anti-naxalite drive can be guessed from the fact that commanders reportedly get feedback from ISRO satellites.

In other words in addition to paramilitary, some regular military installations too have been pressed into service, albeit Mr Chidambaram describes it as a “careful, calibrated and controlled measure.”

The notorious Salwa Judum in Chattisgarh has already succeeded in emptying more than 644 villages and killing and injuring countless people in the process to make the region most brutalised and mock at democratic show-business. And now the turn of Jangal Mahal of West Bengal bordering Jharkhand and Orissa, where joint forces have been unleashing a rein of terror for the last seven months.

Unlike Chattisgarh, Bengal’s Jangal Mahal is not endowed with mineral resources. Economically this region is not lucrative to the mining industry. Even the Jindals will have to import ironore, manganese ore and coal for their mega steel project at Salboni. Here land acquisition is mainly for setting up factories though acute water stress round the year, even in the rainy season may jeopardise their idea of industrialisation. Then poor tribals must be taught a lesson for their audacity to refuse to kowtow to the ruling dispensation and allowing the maoists a base, rather a semi-liberated zone, to carry out their political activities. All “mainstream” parties are at war with the people. Their sole pre-occupation is with internal security, they are now afraid of their own constituencies.

The problem with the maoists is that they are unlikely to abjure violence as demanded by the government before starting any process of dialogue. So long as this pre-condition remains in place it is futile to expect anything dramatic would happen in the killing fields.

For Mr Chidambaram his 3,70,000 men in two major paramilitary establishments—CRPF and BSF—are too inadequate to maintain internal security. So they are now planning to recruit another 400,000 constables mainly drawing from poor peasants as foot soldiers for internal policing. The ever expanding network of internal security arrangement costs the exchequer corers of rupees which can otherwise be utilised for creation of jobs in the tribal belt. The ruling Marxists are happy that Kolkata and Hyderabad have been chosen as two regional headquarters of the National Security Guard.

When it is the question of talks with the maoists they raise the issue of violence. But they have been negotiating with the Naga insurgents for more than a decade without any pre-condition. The dead-locked peace talks between New Delhi and the Isak-Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland will resume in April after nearly a year. For one thing Union Home Minister P Chidambaram looks pragmatic enough not to include any rigid pre-condition in opening dialogue. But state-level leaders—after all law and order is the state subject—are unwilling to recognise the ideological orientation of maoists. The maoists are not averse to Mr Chidambaram's idea as he finds rationality in not imposing 'violence' (or non-violence) on the agenda because the radical left believes in people's war as defined by Mao, they think they cannot bargain with the mighty state machinery from a position of weakness.

In their open letter to Union Railway Minister Ms Mamata Banerjee, the CPI (Maoist) reiterated their oft-repeated stand on 'war and peace' while highlighting the urgency of withdrawal of joint forces from Jangal Mahal to create an atmosphere conducive to meaningful negotiations and talks. Paramilitary and state police forces apart what worries the civil society most is continuing violence perpetrated by the private army raised by the ruling parties.

Indications are that timetable for final assault against the Maoists seem to have been revised for the time being, it may be delayed but it is certainly in the offing despite reservation expressed by Nitish Kumar and Shibu Soren. Maybe electoral compulsions in more than one state in a year or two weigh heavily in favour of delayed onslaught. □□□