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End vigilantism

The Supreme Court's trenchant criticism of the Salwa Judum offers the first glimmer of hope that the reign of terror unleashed by the Chhattisgarh government and its vigilante squads in Dantewada since 2005 might finally be brought to an end. Sponsored, armed, and financed by the State government with the support of the Centre in the egregious belief that fuelling a civil war in the heart of India is the best way of countering Naxalism, the Salwa Judum has exterminated more than 500 innocent civilians and caused the forcible displacement of tens of thousands of tribal people. Substantial numbers have fled to neighbouring Andhra Pradesh and are living in pathetic conditions. Neither the State nor the Central government can evade responsibility for trampling on the rule of law and for the human calamity that has been amply documented by a host of official and unofficial inquiries. As Chief Justice K.G. Balakrishnan justly observed, during the hearing of a public interest petition calling for the disbanding of the Salwa Judum, the distribution of arms to private persons by the government is tantamount to abetting murder.

In the light of mounting evidence that the vigilante outfit is involved in large-scale atrocities, the Chhattisgarh government has made two flagrantly false claims. The first is that it is a "spontaneous" people's initiative. The second is that it is similar to the village defence committees set up in parts of Jammu and Kashmir to protect villagers from terrorist attacks. VDCs are defensive formations rooted in accountable institutions like the village panchayat. The Salwa Judum, on the other hand, is an unaccountable extension of the state designed to apply violence minus the government's fingerprints. Gondi for 'purification hunt' it is a roving, offensive formation led by anti-social elements — not dissimilar to the death squads sponsored by dictators around the world to deal with insurgencies and all manner of deemed opponents. Far from bringing peace, the Salwa Judum proved counterproductive: it is no coincidence that Chhattisgarh has the highest number of casualties at the hands of the Naxalites. Although there are enough reasons to warrant the immediate disbandment of the Salwa Judum, an independent inquiry monitored by the Supreme Court will be a welcome interim measure. Meanwhile, the path must urgently be cleared for the displaced tribal people to return to their homes and fields before the sowing season. Naxalism needs to be countered resourcefully but the response must not end up preying on the very people the government claims it wants to save.