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Funding unrest

Maoists find a new source of generating money by indulging in extortion from NGOs and Panchayati Raj institutions

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THE WORST fears of Orissa government have come true with police officials in Malkangiri district, a well-known Maoist bastion, revealing that the funds being allotted to NGOs in the state are being diverted to the naxalite outfits via extortion. The ultras have also succeeded in making inroads in the panchayati raj institutions' (PRI) functioning and handling of huge government funds in the area.

According to reliable sources, the senior police officials of Malkangiri bordering Andhra Pradesh have, in fact, made a written request to the state government to stop funding local NGOs because the money was ultimately being used to further the rebel cause. The Malkangiri district police in a letter to government described the modus operandi of the Maoists while providing details of the crores of rupees extorted from the NGOs and the PRI institutions by the rebels who are known to pay hefty salaries to their cadre.

Sources added that even a lower level Maoist operative does not get anything less than Rs 15000 per month besides uniform, free food and weapons. The high ranking members are known to carry laptops for exchanging information and sending messages. Police officials believe that naxalite leaders are even using satellite phones though they have no concrete evidence of this so far.

"Given this backdrop they need huge funds to sustain themselves and this money has been coming from NGOs and PRI institutions who are generously funded by the gov-



ernment. Unless NGO funding is stopped, it will be impossible to deal with the ultras effectively," said a senior police officer posted in Malkangiri where the ultras have not only killed commoners and policemen but also attacked high profile politicians in broad daylight. Former Bhartiya Janata Party minister, Arabind Dhali, who had a narrow escape a few years ago, is still high' on their hit list.

As it is, nearly 20 NGOs operate in the Malkangiri-Koraput belt which has a predominant tribal population with some of the tribes like the Bondas enjoying special patronage of the government via NGOs and other specialized agencies. Most of the NGOs active in the district are engaged in literacy development, creating awareness about healthcare and teaching healthy farming techniques to the tribals. The number of PRI institutions being funded by the government is equally high.

That the naxalites have developed a special interest in PRI institutions became evident when they openly campaigned for their favourites in their strongholds in the last panchayat elections. In fact, government and police officials privately admit that ultras field their own candidates at several places and some of them ultimately won.

The fact is that Maoists have realized the importance of these institutions in controlling developmental activities at the local level for which the government allots them substantial funds. Now, both these institutions and the NGOs are being systematically milked by the naxalites, a fact which has also been admitted by some of ultras arrested in the recent past.

Srinivas, a hardcore Maoist arrested by the police in August, had admitted to extorting more than Rs 2 crore annually from these sources. In another case, three high ranking Maoists had fled with Rs 6 crore they had extorted till September causing a flutter in the rebel bastion. Sources said that having made a "fortune" in this manner, they later disassociated themselves from the movement.

With the ultras having turned extortion into a fine art, there is a perennial threat to the NGOs or the PRI institutions who cannot but meet their demands if they have to operate in the area. Hence, the district police feels completely justified in asking the government to stop funding at least the NGOs if not the PRIs who have to be provided funds as a matter of constitutional obligation.