Human Rights Watch: end government support for Salwa Judum

Aarti Dhar

NEW DELHI: The Centre and the
Chhattisgarh government
should hold the security forc-
es and state-backed vigilantes
responsible for having at-
tacked, displaced and killed
people in armed operations
against Maoist rebels since
mid-2005, Human Rights
Watch has said. In a report
released on Tuesday, it called
for an end to all government
support for unlawful activ-
ities by Salwa Judum vigi-
lantes, and urged the State
government to take immedi-
ate measures to protect the
tens of thousands of persons
displaced. It also called upon
the Maoist rebels to end at-
tacks on civilians and other
abuses.

The 182-page report "Being
Neutral is Our Biggest Crime:
Government, Vigilante and
Naxalite Abuses in India's
Chhattisgarh State" docu-

ments human rights abuses,
particularly against indige-
nous tribal communities,
caught in a tug-of-war among
the government security
forces, Salwa Judum and nax-
alites.

Human Rights Watch has
found that since mid-2005,
the security forces and mem-
bers of the Salwa Judum —
which officials describe as a
spontaneous citizen's anti-
naxal movement — attacked
villages, raped and killed vil-
lagers, and burnt down huts
to force people into govern-
ment camps. The report col-
lected more than 50
eyewitness accounts of at-
tacks involving the security
forces in 18 villages in Dan-
tedwada and Bijapur dis-
tricts. At the same time, the
naxalites carried out bomb-
ings and abductions, and beat
up and executed civilians,
particularly those suspected
of supporting Salwa Judum.

Tens of thousands of inter-
nally displaced persons are
stranded in government
camps in Chhattisgarh or in
the forest land of neighbour-
ing Andhra Pradesh.
The report is based on four
weeks of on-the-ground re-
search in the two States in
late 2007 and early 2008, in-
cluding 175 accounts from af-
fected villagers, Salwa Judum
leaders, government officials
and police, and former naxa-
lites.

At least 1,00,000 people
have resettled in camps in
Chhattisgarh or fled to And-
hra Pradesh, says the report.
Those living in the camps
have little access to govern-
ment healthcare or livelihood
opportunities. Basic sanita-
tion is often lacking and the
government has failed to pro1
vide free food. Between
30,000 and 50,000 displaced
persons have settled in the
forest land of Andhra Pradesh

and are doubly dispossessed
as the government has de-
scribed their hamlets as ille-
gal and used excessive force
to repeatedly evict or relocate
them, without consulting
them or giving them alterna-
tive housing.
The report also highlights
the impact of this conflict on
children's lives. The naxalites
have long used children, as
young as six, as informers and
those 12 and above in armed
operations. The Chhattisgarh
police have also recruited and
used children as special po-
lice officers to assist security
forces, often deploying them
in high-risk anti-naxal comb-
ing operations. While the
Chhattisgarh police have ac-
knowledged this as an error,
the government is yet to de-
vise a scheme for systemat-
ically identifying,
demobilising and rehabilitat-
ing the underage police offi-
cers.

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