

WHEN SKY SPITS FIRE

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A REPORT ON DRONE-AERIAL BOMBING IN BASTAR



CDRO

CO-ORDINATION OF DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

CDRO FACT-FINDING TEAM

SUGGESTED CONTRIBUTION - 25RS

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A Report By:

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Bombing started at around 11 AM on 11 January. I was separating rice from paddy in the khalla when the bomb fell on a tree 20 meters away. It broke a branch of the tree and then fell on the ground and exploded. I ran towards the deep forest to save my life.....the government bombed; who else will”

“Why did they start firing on us from the helicopters? We had no guns, and neither were we in guerrilla uniforms”

“Why are there these attacks on Bastar? Is it a foreign country? We need to go to the field to feed our stomachs; the soldiers are filling our bodies with bullets. What is the Indian government doing to stop this?”

INTRODUCTION

On 12th of January 2023, various media portals, including The Hindu, Hindustan Times and NDTV, reported about evidently one of the most extensive anti-Naxal operations undertaken by the joint forces of Telangana Greyhounds, Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CoBRA), Central Reserve Police Forces and Chhattisgarh Police on 11th Jan, 2023. According to reports published in NDTV, this operation was to scoop out Battalion No. 1 of the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army, the armed wing of the CPI (Maoist). It has been reported that this battalion was headed by the Naxal leader, Madvi Hidma, who was injured in the operation, according to these reports.

On the same day, the 12th of January, Hindustan Times and The Hindu published articles which included allegations by the Maoists about aerial bombings and the rejection of the same by Bastar I.G., P Sunderraj. The reports contained excerpts of the statement issued by Central Reserve Police Force, Bastar IG P. Sunderraj and one issued by the South Bastar Division Committee of the Maoists. While the CPI (Maoist), in its statement, alleged aerial attacks by drones and helicopters on villages of Pamed and Kistaram block on border areas of the Chhattisgarh-Telangana border, the statement issued by Bastar IG P Sunderraj rubbished the claims of the Maoists by stating that it is one among many such attempts by the Maoists to mislead the native population and cover up their losing ground and shaken morale of their cadres. The statement issued by the CPI (Maoist) claimed that the police and security forces are following the directions of the Union Home Ministry to uproot the Maoists before the parliamentary polls of 2024, a claim that Union Home Minister Amit Shah had made on 7th January 2023 in Raipur, the capital city of Chhattisgarh. Meanwhile, IG P. Sunderraj said, *“State police and security forces deployed in Bastar are committed to bringing an end to the nefarious intent and act of the banned CPI Maoist outfit. At the same time, there is no compromise in our policy of keeping the well-being and safety of our people as the epicenter of our plan and action”*.

It may be added here that various local news portals of Bastar, Chhattisgarh reported that the villagers of Usoor Block alleged that aerial bombings had taken place in Mettaguda, Bottethong, Rasapalli, Sakiler, Kannemerka, and Errapad villages of Usoor Block, Bijapur on 11th of January, 2023. Also, it is pertinent to mention that this was not the first time that such allegations of aerial bombings have surfaced. The villagers of Bastar have made similar allegations of aerial bombings in April 2021 and 2022, and Bastar police similarly rejected those allegations.

The villagers of Bijapur district alleged aerial bombing on Adivasi hamlets (small clusters of houses) between Botalanka and Palagudem villages. The villagers claimed that at least 12 bombs were dropped on the hamlets in the dead of night using drones. Further, similar allegations surfaced in 2022, when villagers of Usoor and Konta blocks (in the districts of Bijapur and Sukma, respectively) claimed that their villages, namely Bottethong, Mettaguda, Duled, Sakiler and Pottemangum were bombed using drones on intervening night of 14-15th April 2022. Each time, the testimonies of the villagers, along with images of remnants of the bomb, were circulated by media houses, and the police rejected the claims. In April 2022, National Campaign to Defend Democracy released a statement condemning the aerial bombing of 14-15th April 2022, demanding an end to aerial bombings and an independent inquiry into the matter. This statement, undersigned by 30 prominent civil rights organizations and individuals, also urged the government to address human rights violations by security forces and engage in peace talks with the CPI (Maoist). Further, a Delhi-based joint forum of democratic, progressive individuals and organizations, Forum Against Corporatization and Militarization, also condemned the aerial bombings of April 2022 and January 2023.

Following repeated news of aerial bombings and demands from civil society groups, the Coordination of Democratic Rights Organisations (CDRO), a joint platform of 18 Civil and Democratic organizations of the country, decided to send a fact-finding team to Villages of Usoor Block, which were allegedly targets of these drone-led bomb attacks on 11th January 2023, to conduct an inquiry and prepare a report on the matter.

WHAT ARE THEY HIDING?

As decided, a CDRO Fact Finding Team of 24 activists from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana Unit of Civil Liberties Committee (CLC), Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR) West Bengal and Peoples Union for Civil Rights (PUCR) Haryana, along with Human Rights activist and lawyer, Bela Bhatia, and journalist, Kamal Shukla, set out for a fact-finding mission on 1st February 2023. The team met the Sukma District Collector and informed him about the purpose of their visit to the region. The district collector advised the team not to visit, citing security reasons and that the region is a highly sensitive zone. However, they were not officially stopped when the group insisted they would visit the areas and be individually responsible in case of imminent risk. As the team proceeded towards the villages of Usoor Block, they were stopped at CRPF 150 Battalion Camp at Dubbatota Town in Sukma district on 1st February 2023. Despite informing the camp officials about the intimation to the District Collector about their visit, the team was not allowed to proceed further, citing security concerns. The security forces even claimed that they were an agency of the Central Government and that the state government's directions did not apply to them!

The team was harassed by disallowing them basic amenities such as food and shelter. The security forces directed the restaurants and shops to shut down, denying food, shelter and other basic amenities to the team. They were kept in a tin shed beside a waiting house for travelers. They were not even allowed to proceed towards a nearby village where the villagers and the Gram Panchayat members had arranged their stay in a Panchayat Bhavan. The team was kept in that tin shed, open from three sides and heavily cordoned by security forces, overnight in the chilly winter of February. The team also met the camp commander the next day, on 2nd Feb 2023. After long deliberation, they were allowed to proceed from the Dubbatota CRPF camp towards the villages, only to be stopped at another checkpoint merely a few km ahead. The local taxi operators were hounded for faring the team and were sent back. Facing such adverse conditions, the team had to cancel its fact-finding mission and return helplessly.

The deliberate attempt to disallow free movement of various civil rights activists from multiple democratic rights organizations, journalists and lawyers by the security forces, thereby stopping them from conducting an inquiry into the allegation of aerial bombing on 11th January 2023, raises serious questions on the constructed normalcy around operations of security forces. It also raises equally tough questions on the authenticity of the counterclaims made by the Bastar Police and IG Sunderraj whenever the villagers alleged aerial bombings. The continued harassment of CDRO team members for around 24 hours, the images of bomb remnants, testimonies of villagers and the continuing silence around the question of drone attacks raise one pertinent question: what are the police and government officials trying to hide?

To find the answers to these questions and ascertain the facts from various claims and counterclaims, CDRO sent another team of 14 activists from the above-mentioned four civil rights organizations to conduct the probe in March 2023.

INTO THE JUNGLES OF BASTAR

CDRO once again formed a fact-finding team of fourteen members from its constituent organizations: the Civil Liberties Committee Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights and the People's Union for Civil Rights. This time around, CDRO took a decision and did not inform the state officials about its fact-finding mission to avoid the obstructions, which the state officials would have otherwise created. The fact-finding team reached the affected villages directly on 4th March 2023 and interacted with the villagers. The first village where the team visited and interacted was Erapalli village.

The villagers informed us that the villages affected by the aerial bombings were mainly Bottethong, Mettaguda and Errapalli of Usoor Block, Bijapur District. The distance of all these villages is hardly 2-3 km from each other.

The Adivasis of these villages work collectively as a unit in the agricultural process, and the crop is shared according to the portion of land cultivated by a family. Primary medical care is undertaken by a *Vadde* (Medicine man) using herbs. The nearest hospital to these villages is in the town of Pamed, approximately 20 km away. As far as education is concerned, a school with a primary educational facility is available in Rasapalli village, some kilometers away.

Our conversations began once two representatives of Moolavasi Bachao Manch reached the village and joined the fact-finding team

In our conversation with Arjun Kunjam and Sodi Bheema, members of Moolwasi Bachao Manch from Silger, they told us that the people have been resisting their displacement and destruction of their *Jal-Jungle-Jameen* caused by the rapacious mining activities undertaken by various Domestic and Multinational Corporations. They say that for this sole purpose, the camps and roads are being built in different regions of Bastar. The Adivasi villagers oppose building multiple paramilitary camps at more than 20 protest sites in Bastar. The movement led by

Moolvasi Bachao Manch, against the paramilitary camp in Silger is the longest-running democratic protest against camps, completing two years since its inception in May 2021. The protest at Silger gained momentum and widespread attention after four people were killed in CRPF firing on the protesting villagers on May 17, 2021.



Fig 1.1 – Villagers protesting with dead bodies of those killed by CRPF at Silger.

Sodi Bheema told us that the people are resisting the construction of roads and camps because they are being built to loot the resources of Bastar by displacing the Adivasis and destroying the forest. He says, *“We don’t oppose any road being built, but we do not want big wide roads. We want small roads which the people can use. We are opposing big roads because with these big roads comes camps, and with these two comes the mining companies”*.



Fig 1.2 – Villagers led by Moolvasi Bachao Manch protesting at Silger CRPF camp.

Explaining the rise in democratic consciousness and resilience among adivasis, Arjun Kunjam said *“the people who were earlier afraid of police and paramilitary are now protesting against camps and roads by going up to the camps”*. He believes

that the united struggles of Adivasi people under the banner of Moolvasi Bachao Manch and other such organizations is the reason that the government is building more and more camps and conducting aerial attacks to create a fear psychosis among the Adivasi villagers.

It is pertinent to mention that the governments at the Center and the State have time and again tagged these movements to be fueled by the Maoists. Despite their months-long democratic and

peaceful struggle against camps and roads, Bastar IG P. Sunderraj has said that the Adivasis are forced or misled by the Maoist into opposing such developments. It is very concerning when the governments and the senior police officials brand a peaceful democratic movement of people as a front instigated by a guerrilla force because such tagging makes the handling of issues raised by the protesting villagers to be prejudiced, wholly ignored or often invite unwarranted state repression, as has been the case in various on-going movements in Bastar.

Bastar division of Chhattisgarh is enriched with various precious metals and resources such as limestone, graphite, bauxite, iron ore, manganese, gold etc., and these regions have been witnessing multiple mining projects being undertaken by domestic mining companies as well as Foreign mining giants, amid heavy resistance by the people against corporate loot of resources and destruction of Jal-Jungle-Jameen. The state has often tagged these movements as being incited by Maoists, who are creating hindrances in the region's development, thereby justifying state repression by state and non-state actors since *Salwa Judum* and Operation Green-Hunt. However, not much progress has been made in these areas on the development front, apart from the infrastructure required to extract resources. News agency 'The Wire' reported that Chhattisgarh state's Women and Child Commission's report based on a scheme called 'Vajan Tyohar' (weight festival) shows the tribal districts having more cases of malnutrition than non-tribal districts. *"In the case of underweight people (weight according to age), the highest number of malnutrition cases is in the Sukma district at 34.73%. Regarding stunting (height according to age), Balrampur has the maximum cases at 22.21%. Regarding the highest wasted growth (weight according to height), Sukma has the leading cases at 57.69%. Currently, in Bastar, 24,299 children are malnourished. Of these, 6,080 are severely malnourished. The Bakawand block, Bastar block and Lohandiguda blocks have more malnourished children than the other blocks of the district"*, the wire reported (April 12, 2023).

METTAGUDA: WHERE THE BOMBS FELL

The team visited the first village where the bombs were dropped. The team traveled almost 2 kilometers on rough terrain inside the forest to reach Mettaguda. The villagers took the team to the agricultural field belonging to one villager named Mooka Podium. The team observed pits formed due to the explosion caused by the bombs. There were nine pits in a zigzag pattern, a few metres away from each other, within hundred meters from the tree where the first bomb fell and broke its branch. The team also witnessed the remnants of bombs and small metallic balls in the pits. To the east of the said agricultural field are the Hills, primarily rocks with some vegetation. According to the villagers, the bombing started at around 11 am on 11th January 2023, when six people, including two minors, were just passing by the agricultural field after processing the rice from the paddy in the *Khalla* (Gondi word for a piece of land where harvested crops are processed), approximately 20 metres away from the tree, on which the first bomb landed. Mooka Podium was present at the *Khalla* when the bombs fell and exploded. Almost 300 Adivasi villagers from affected villages joined the team in the agricultural field. The team interviewed the owner of a 2-acre agricultural field, Mooka Podium.



Fig 1.3 – Mooka Podium talking to CDRO team

Mooka Podium says, *“Bombing started at around 11 AM on 11 January. I was separating rice from paddy in the khalla when the bomb fell on a tree 20 meters away. It broke a branch of the tree and then fell on the ground and exploded. I ran towards the deep forest to save my life”*.

Upon being questioned about who might have dropped the bombs, he instantly replied, *“the government bombed; who else will”*. The team asked him if he could confirm that it was a drone that dropped the bombs, he said that he couldn't confirm as it was very far away and not much visible, but he heard a buzzing sound (plausibly of a drone). Mooka Podium says, *“I saw three small planes in the sky, one behind the other. Then it came twice again, in the same manner”*. He further

adds, “few minutes after the bombing, two helicopters flew from the direction of the hills to the khalla, firing bullets”.

Hearing the testimony of Mooka Podium and other villagers who don't wish to be mentioned and observing the nine pits caused by explosions of the bombs, the team ascertained that there were three batches of three Unidentified Aerial Vehicle (UAVs), each engaged in the bombing, each of them dropping one bomb at a



Fig 1.4 – Craters of the bombs



Fig 1.5 – Pithole formed by bomb explosion

time. Further, the team could conclude that the UAVs were drones, making no more than a buzzing sound, as Mooka Podium and other villagers said. Additionally, the team was shown parts of the bomb secured by the villagers. The bomb appeared to have three parts, first in a conical shape followed by a detonator switch attached to a battery and the part where metallic balls and explosive substances like gelatine were supposedly placed.



Fig 1.6 - Bomb part bearing number 545

The bomb parts had numerical markings made by what appeared to be marker pens. The whole composition of the bomb, from the details to the markings on them, did not appear as that of conventional bombs but something devised with technological expertise at the institutional level. The markings on these bomb parts were 566, 540, 547, and 545.

The villagers informed the team that some bombs were dropped on the hills near the agricultural fields in Mettuguda. Therefore, the team went up the hill and observed dent marks on the rocks, probably caused by the explosion. It also found metallic pieces of

the bomb and observed multiple pellet holes in the branches of dried trees caused by the shrapnel of the bomb. As the team trailed down the hill in Mettaguda, hundreds of villagers accompanying the team started sloganeering, “*Drone hamla band baro, Bastar mein narsanhar band karo, Bastar se police camp khali karo*”, etc. (Stop drone attacks, stop the genocide in Bastar, Withdraw camps from Bastar).



Fig 1.7 - Villagers sloganeering as the team trailed down the hill

CURIOUS CASE OF BOTTETHONG.

After concluding the interviews and observing all spots and evidence, the team was directed by hundreds of villagers towards Bottethong village, approx. 2 km south of Mettaguda. The team reached Bottethong, where dozens of Bottethong villagers gathered in a field near a thatched hut.

The team met seven villagers, including two women, who were working in a field near Bottethong village when the attack happened. The villagers told the team that no bombs were dropped in Bottethong, but two helicopters flew in from the direction of Mettaguda in the North. The team interviewed Thathi Deva, *Patel* of Mettaguda (village headman), who told us that although he was not in the field when the helicopters came, he heard gunfire. He said the firing continued for almost an hour from 11 am to 12 noon. The team observed three trees near the field having bullet



Fig 1.8 - A tree having piercing mark in downward trajectory.

marks on them. A few metres away from the field, one tree had a piercing mark created by the bullet hitting it and ricocheting from the side. The shot appears to have been fired from an elevated position because the piercing mark has a downward trajectory.

The names of the villagers who were interviewed are:

1. Madkam Deva
2. Kovasi Deva
3. Sodi Manu
4. Kovasi Hunga
5. Madvi Hungi
6. Madkam Phulmati
7. Kovvasi Bheema



Fig 1.9 - CDRO team interviewing the villagers

Kovvasi Bheema said, *“Around 11 am, two helicopters came from Mettaguda and started firing towards us. We were processing the harvested paddy and ran to save our lives. When asked whether he saw any security personnel inside the helicopter, he says, “I cannot say how many soldiers were there in the helicopters”. “The helicopters turned and went towards Errapalli in the South-west direction”*, He added.

Kavasi Hunga, the land owner, said he was in the field at the moment. He said, *“I ran to save my life as soon as I saw the helicopters approaching us”*. Madkam Phoolmati, who was in the field, said she heard the bullets fired and ran towards her house to save her life.

Villagers said that one woman named Potem Hungi was killed in the firing 1 km away from Bottethong in the southwest direction. As reported by the villagers and claimed by the Maoists in their statement published in the media, Potem Hungi was a women cadre of the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA). She hailed from a village called Sarpangunda. The villagers took the team to the spot where Potem Hungi's dead body was found. On its way, the team observed bullet holes in the trees and the blood-stained leaves at the place where Pottem Hungi fell. Kovvasi Bheema told us that he saw the dead body of Potem Hungi, *“she sustained a bullet injury to her chest”*.

ATROCITY IN ERRAPALLI

The team visited the third and last village, Errapalli, southwest of Bottethong, where the villagers witnessed the aerial attack. The villagers said that they had completed processing the paddy in the *Khalla* and were about to pray to their local deity, feast and drink mahua when the helicopters came from the side of Bottethong and started firing upon them. According to the villagers, the helicopters were flying at very low altitudes and firing on them, creating panic among people present at the spot, including women and children. They all ran in a hurry to save their lives. The team met 12 people, ten of whom were at the spot when the firing started. The names of the villagers are:

1. Hidma Ram Rava
2. Punem Kosi
3. Madvi Lakshu
4. Podium Podia
5. Podium Hungi
6. Podium Bheema
7. Podium Jogi
8. Podium Pojaiah
9. Madkam Mangdi
10. Madkam Sudki
11. Madkam Budri
12. Podium Hidme

Hidma Ram Rava says, *“We were in the field and had completed extracting rice from the paddy when the firing started. We ran to save our lives. one person ran towards the pond and submerged himself in it.”*

Punem Kosi said she saw one person firing from the helicopter, so she hid in a pit. The helicopters came and encircled three times before turning



Fig 1.10 - Villager pointing out the direction of helicopter gunfire

to head in the south direction. She burst out in anger as she described the scenario. She says, *“Why did they start firing on us*

from the helicopters? We had no guns, and neither were we in guerrilla uniforms”. Questioning the intent of the security forces and the government, she adds, “I don’t know why the military is firing on us when they say that they are fighting Maoists”. She also presented a bullet shell that she recovered from the field.

Madvi Lakshu said they were working in the field when they heard the firing, after which the helicopters came towards them and started firing. She says, *“A bullet hit a tree immediately after I took cover behind it.”* She explains the near-death experience and adds, *“I could have died if the bullet hit me. After that, I ran and submerged myself in a nearby pond.”*

While Podium Podia says that they started running towards the tree, as soon as they heard the sound of the approaching helicopters, Podium Hungi said that she thought she would die. Recalling the horrific situation and the helplessness she felt at the moment, she adds, *“I was in the open field with nowhere to hide, so I told others to run and save their lives.”*

Podium Jogi explained the horrific incident: *“When the firing started, I hid my one-year-old daughter in nearby bushes and ran in confusion. My daughter could have died that day.”*

Madkam Mangdi, a widower who owns a piece of land from which she had harvested paddy, says, *“According to Adivasi culture, we were praying to our gods when the firing started. I ran towards the pond and submerged myself in it. I felt like I would die.”* While she was trying to save herself from raining bullets, her daughter Madkam Sukdi, who was cooking food before the firing, ran inside the forest. Madkam Gudri was at a nearby pond when the firing started near the *khalla*, so he ran in the opposite direction to save himself.

The team observed a tree at the spot, behind which Madvi Lakshu took cover to save herself. According to the villagers, the bullet hit the tree and got stuck, which was recovered by cutting the tree bark. The team observed that the now-exposed inner part



*Fig 1.11 - The tree where Madvi Lakshu took cover
(see bullet mark)*

has a bump created by the bullet getting stuck in it. The mark on the tree suggests that the shot has been fired from an elevated angle as it appears to be on a downward trajectory. Another tree had sustained a similar piercing cut, where the bullet, going downward, hit the tree and ricocheted off.

Another woman, Podium Hidme, who is married and came to Errapalli to help her mother in agricultural work, hid behind another tree that got hit by a bullet. She angrily said, *“PLGA was near Bottethong, so why did they attack here? We don’t know if the army came for them or not. We were doing our work. We have lived here for ages and work in the field and jungle to survive. How will we earn our food if they keep attacking like this? We don’t want drone attacks.”* Questioning the long-existing tendency



Fig 1.12 - Podium Hidme (with the bullet shell) besides tree she used as cover

of treating Adivasis as sub-humans, she adds, *“Every person, whether Adivasi, Hindu or Muslim, is identical. Why do they want to slaughter us like animals? I could have died that day.”* She fiercely questions the government’s intent behind the aerial attacks: *“Why are there these attacks on Bastar? Is it a foreign country? We need to go to the field to feed our stomachs; the soldiers are filling our bodies with bullets. What is the Indian government doing to stop this?”*

Sodi Joga said, *“We were going to drink Mahua (Adivasi traditional drink) after the prayer, but then the police came on helicopters and started firing”*. He says, *“I ran and hid behind a tree; I did not run any longer towards the forest because then the chances of getting hit by a bullet were more.”*

CAMPS & ROADS- CARRIERS OF 'DEVELOPMENT'?

Bastar, rich with mineral resources and largely inaccessible to people from other parts of the country in the name of security concerns, ironically transports the extracted mineral resources through road and railway networks with much ease. For example, iron ore mined by NMDC from Bailadila Hills gets easily transported to Vizag through a remote railway line from Kirandul, solely operating for resource extraction. From Vizag, these iron ores are shipped through freight ships into international trade routes and to Japan. The Bijapur-Sukma region is rich in Iron ore that is being mined by the National Mineral Development Corporation (NMDC) at Bailadila Block No. 5 and, in recent years, developed a township at Bacheli to mine blocks no. 10 and 11A of Bailadila hills.

The opposition to the construction of roads near Amdai Ghati hills in Narayanpur District, set to be mined by Jaiswal Neco Mining Industries, is based on a belief rooted in materiality that the roads will be used to bring in paramilitary forces and extract the resources from the region. People have opposed the construction of roads and camps at more than 20 protest sites in Bastar. The mass organization of the Adivasis of Bastar, Moolwasi Bachao Manch, is leading these protests. Security forces argue that roads are essential for the development of the region. For the construction of said roads, they claim that establishing camps is necessary to provide security for the construction work. Bastar IG P Sunderraj has made such claims; however, veteran journalist Malini Subramaniam reported in 'Scroll' that the camps built in the 35 km stretch between Basaguda and Silger still remain to be withdrawn, even after construction of roads. Moreover, after more than 2 years of democratic struggle against camps and roads in Silger, the paramilitary forces burned down the stage of Moolwasi Bachao Manch. and established yet another camp in its ambitious policy of "*Vishwas, Suraksha aur Vikas*".

In the interview with Moolwasi Bachao Manch members of the Silger Unit, Sodi Bheema and Arjun Kunjam, told us that the

Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) established its camps in Silger on 11th May 2021 on 10-acre agricultural land without the consultation and consent of Gram Sabha (Village council). From 13th May 2021, a protest emerged against the forceful acquisition of agricultural land and construction of paramilitary camps. On 17th May 2021, CRPF personnel opened fire on the large crowd of protestors marching towards the camp, killing three people on the spot. One pregnant woman later succumbed to the injuries sustained in the stampede caused by the firing on 17th May. Since then, villagers of Silger have been demanding the withdrawal of the camp, road and justice for the slain people.

Furhermore, It is pertinent to mention that Panchayat Extension to Schedule Areas (PESA) Act, 1996, mandates that the consent of Gram Sabha must be acquired before undertaking any developmental activities. These safeguards were added to protect the rights of scheduled tribes on their resources and to protect their culture, which is wholly interwoven with their habitat. Regardless of the constitutional guarantees and legal protection under Schedule V and PESA Act, the state has established more than 60 Paramilitary camps across Bastar in 5 years by forcefully acquiring forest as well as agricultural lands without the consent of Gram Sabhas.

It is important to ponder on the fact that despite years of road projects, development programs and building camps to house thousands of paramilitary forces, Bastar has been absent from state's development agenda, or there has been a lack of honest intent to develop it in the interest of the people, whose resources worth millions of dollars are being taken away. According to the Department of School Education, Government of Chhattisgarh, 1816 out of 8,054 primary, pre-secondary, and secondary schools in Bastar have either one or no teacher at all. Healthcare too is dismal and people have to travel miles through rough terrain of dense forest to towns and cities for accessing healthcare facilities.

LARGER PICTURE: OPERATION SAMADHAN-PRAHAR

A closer look at the rampant militarisation of Bastar through multiple paramilitary camps points to more extensive policy-level planning at the higher echelons of the State. Digging deeper into the origins of camps, such as those currently built and equivocally opposed by people, one is taken to a review meeting on the Left-Wing Extremism (LWE) held in New Delhi in May 2017. Chaired by the then Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh, the meeting witnessed the launch of a new policy to counter the Maoist movement, called Operation SAMADHAN. This operation provides for the construction of 400 fortified police stations called Forward Operational Bases. These 400 such camps will be built in the states that have rich mineral deposits and are most affected by Maoist Movement, namely, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Odisha, Maharashtra etc.

This same Operation provides for the construction of roads in these most affected districts under various projects, such as Road Requirement Plan-I (RRP-I) and Road Construction Program for Left Wing Extremism Areas (RCPLWEA). The state has sanctioned the construction of 17,600 km of road network, of which more than 9343 km of road has already been built. The road constructions, which the people oppose at various protest sites, are part of the above mentioned projects.

Among the acronyms of SAMADHAN, H stands for Harnessing Technology. Under the Harnessing Technology part, the state is acquiring advanced weaponry and gadgets, supposedly to counter the Maoist movement. A deal worth 200 million dollars was made by the Indian Government with the Israeli government for procurement of more advanced Heron Mark II drones, despite already having 180 Israeli UAVs, including 68 Heron Mark I drones in operational Capacity. Indian state has accepted usage of drones in surveillance activities to track the movement of Maoist guerrillas. Furthermore, these drones are reportedly being operated by Air Force personnel from the National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO), an institution established with the help of 10 US intelligence agency NSA operatives in 2010.

The funds for these above mentioned projects are being provided under various schemes launched by the Central government, such as Special Central Assistance (SCA), Special Infrastructure Scheme (SIS), Security Related Expenditure (SRE), etc. According to reports, the Union government provided Rs. 1,623 crore to LWE-affected states under the SRE scheme, Rs. 371 crore under the SIS scheme and Rs. 1,180 crores under SIS/FPS scheme from 2017 to 2022.

Operation SAMADHAN, as the acronym suggests, is a multi-fold operation, including the formation and use of *Gupt Sainiks* (Shadow Intelligence Officers) as well as auxiliary forces such as District Reserve Guards (DRG) through various surrender schemes, funded by Civic Action Program (CAP) and SCA schemes. Furthermore, an essential aspect of this operation is the military offensive, termed Prahar, currently in its 3rd phase.

CONCLUSION

After visiting Mettaguda, Bottethong, and Errapalli villages of Usoor Block, Bijapur district on the Chhattisgarh-Telangana border and collecting testimonies, examining evidence and the spots of bombing, the Fact-finding team concludes that:

1. There was an aerial bombing in the Mettaguda village on 11th Jan 2023, at around 11 am. Nine bombs were dropped using drones, followed by intense firing from 2 helicopters, putting the life of villagers at grave risk.
2. There was firing from 2 helicopters in Bottethong soon after the bombing in Mettaguda. One female cadre of PLGA, Potem Hungi, was killed in the jungles near Bottethong.
3. Villagers in Errapalli were fired upon by two helicopters, severely threatening the life of 10 villagers.
4. CRPF forces fired from helicopters targeting innocent Adivasi villagers.

The team concludes that the attack started around 11 am and lasted for over an hour, with short intervals. It is pertinent to mention that the Adivasi villagers of Bastar made similar allegations of aerial bombings in April 2021 and 2022 in the bordering villages of the Bijapur-Sukma districts of Bastar. Previously, the villagers have protested against such drone bombings, and videos and photos of bomb remnants have surfaced on the media platform. **Although contradictory statement has been made by head of Chattisgarh sector of CRPF, Inspector General Saket Kumar Singh. In an interview with ‘Scroll’, he accepted that his men fire in “self defence” from a helicopter on 11th January, close to Mettaguda. “We were trying to land and were fired upon so we fired in retaliation.....we are allowed to do that”, ‘Scroll’ quoted him saying (May 04, 2023). However, the Bastar police have shamelessly denied incidents of any such aerial bombings.** The confirmation of aerial bombings of 11th Jan, the inaccessibility of these regions due to heavy militarisation and the deliberate suppression of information by state agencies, points out the foul play in the previous denial of Bastar police

when an allegation of aerial bombings was made in April 2021 and 2022.

These bombings, particularly the bombing of 11th January 2023 in Usoor block, whose fact and existence have been directly ascertained by the fact-finding team, clearly violate various international laws and covenants to which India is a signatory state. International regulations of war prohibit aerial attacks in an internal armed conflict, especially in areas inhabited by civilians. Article 3 of the Geneva Convention states that the government must prevent harm to the public. However, it is very concerning that the state itself is bombing its citizen. One is then forced to question, what to do if the state bombs? Furthermore, if the state considers that civil war is ongoing in the country's central regions, then it must declare it. International organizations such as United Nations Human Rights Council and Amnesty International should act as monitoring bodies to maintain checks on excesses and human rights violations by state or non-state actors.

Flaunting all the international laws, Indian State has waged an undeclared civil war on the people of the country in these mineral-rich regions, and in the absence of monitoring bodies, the state has resorted to all sorts of brutalities, including mass murders, rape, fake encounters, illegal arrests etc., since the inception of state-backed vigilante militia, *Salwa Judum* in 2005. *Salwa Judum* was followed by the infamous Operation Green Hunt in 2009, a few years before the banning of *Salwa Judum* by the Supreme Court of India in 2011. Despite Supreme Court banning the use of civilians or surrendered naxals in counter-insurgency operations, the state is rampantly using the same by converting them into auxiliary forces like District Reserve Guards, Bastar Fighters and *Gupt Sainiks* (Shadow Intelligence Officers). With the rampant militarisation of these regions through multiple paramilitary camps, the state has paralysed the life and liberty of the people in these regions by creating a fear of annihilation experienced during *Salwa Judum* and Green-Hunt.

The policy of “*winning the hearts and minds*” of the people has been used as a propaganda tool by discrediting the democratic struggle of people as something backed by the Maoists, thereby

justifying state repression when needed. Furthermore, these camps, apart from curtailing people's struggle against corporate loot, also act as barriers to the flow of information on the incidents from coming out from the region to the people of the country and the world at large. This helps create a "*war without witnesses*" that the state needs to carry on its excesses, like in the case of Sarkeguda, Edesmetta, Gompad, Tadmethla and many more.

Despite the judicial enquiry commissions affirming the encounters of Edesmetta and Sarkeguda to be fake, leading to the death of dozens of Adivasis, the State has not taken any step to ensure justice for the people by prosecuting the responsible persons; instead, it has tried to silence any democratic voice that spoke of justice. These incidences point to the state's utter disregard for the life and dignity of the country's people in these regions. The state has digressed from its duty to protect the people's right to life and liberty and all the democratic ethos brought forth by the democratic struggles of the people. Instead, it has bombed its own people with an utter disregard for all the international laws, constitutional guarantees and duties, and above all, the democratic aspiration of the people.

Furthermore, it is pertinent to mention that digging into the facts and circumstances of the case, it is harder to overlook the fact that the camps, roads and drones are all part and parcel of Operation SAMADHAN-Prahar. This operation is a continuation of a long history of state repression on people, in the interest of corporate loot of resources, starting from Salwa Judum to Operation Green-hunt and Operation Saranda to Operation Anaconda. All of these operations meant to 'clear and hold' the region for corporate loot are justified in the name of countering the Maoist movement, even though it is a movement rooted in socio-economic and political questions of the country and more the state unleashes repression and exploits resources of the people, more it fuels the Maoist movement. The expert group, constituted by the Indian state in 2006, consisting of prominent civil society members such as G. Haragopal, Bela Bhatia as well as the present NSA Ajit Doval, iterated the same line that resolution to this movement cannot be achieved through military

means but by addressing the socio-economic and political questions concerning the movement. However, with growing authoritarianism and disregard for democratic processes, this question of socio-economic and political concerns has been turned into a military one, negating all possibility of peace and nothing but a war on the people.

Shocking and concerning as it is, looking at the brutal history of state repression in these central regions of the country, it is also not unbelievable that the state can bomb its people. There is a similar event etched in pages of history, when fighter jets of the Indian Air Force were used to bomb the people of our county. On March 5, 1966, four fighter jets of the Indian Air Force – Frenchbuilt Dassault Ouragan fighters (nicknamed Toofanis) and British Hunters – were deployed to bomb Aizawl. Taking off from Tezpur, Kumbigram and Jorhat in Assam, the planes first used machine guns to fire at the town. They returned the next day to drop incendiary bombs. The strafing of Aizawl and other areas continued till March 13, even as the town’s panicked civilian population fled to the hills.

Bombings, yet again?

Furthermore, allegations of aerial bombings have yet again surfaced, for the 4th time in three years. As reported in the media, the villagers have alleged aerial attacks/bombings in Jabbagatta, Meenagatta, Kavargatta, and Bhattiguda villages of Bijapur district on 7th April 2023. No casualty has been reported. However, many villagers sustained injuries in the ensuing chaos to save their lives. One person named Kalmu from Jabbagatta reportedly

suffered injuries on his head and ear while trying to escape the bombings. It is not reported how many bombs were dropped, but three helicopters were engaged in the aerial attack



Fig 1.13 - Map portraying sites of Aerial-bombing on 11th January and 7th April, 2023. Photo: Scroll.in

on 7th April. The villagers have also staged a protest with the remnants of the bombs. The matter requires urgent attention and a sincere probe. It is pertinent to mention that distance between Mettaguda and site of alleged aerial bombing of 7th April, 2023 (Bhattiguda) is barely 50 Kms. **(See map)**

Coordination of Democratic Rights Organisations strongly condemn the aerial attack, including the drone bombing and machine gun fire from helicopters on villagers of Mettaguda, Bottethong and Errapalli on 11th January 2023. We believe that



Fig 1.14 - Bomb craters of alleged Aerial-bombing at Bhattiguda on 7th April

bombing the country's people, whether engaged in a political armed struggle or peaceful struggle, is a genocidal act, as it serves no purpose and provides no solution. Furthermore, such acts are in violation of international laws and covenants to which India is a signatory. We unequivocally condemn the rampant militarisation of

mineral-rich regions of the country by building multiple paramilitary camps, harassment of people in the name of surrender policies and killing of people in the name of countering the Maoist movement. We recognise that Operation SAMADHAN-Prahar is the basis of these aerial bombings, the camps and state excesses on people through forced surrenders, illegal arrests, sexual violence and fake encounters. We believe that it is against the democratic fabric of any society and should be withdrawn in the interest of peace and justice. We urge the Supreme Court of India to take suo moto cognisance and conduct an independent judicial probe involving civil rights activists, headed by a retired Supreme Court Judge.

DEMANDS

1. *State should immediately cease all forms of aerial attacks and stop the war on the people of Bastar and elsewhere in the country.*
2. *Respect and listen to the demands of people who are against the establishment of camps, big roads, corporate loot and ensure the sanctity of Gram Sabhas by implementing the PESA Act.*
3. *Put an immediate stop to extra-judicial killings, illegal arrests, fake surrenders and sexual violence perpetrated against the people.*
4. *Hold the perpetrators of Sarkeguda and Edesmetta fake encounters accountable for their crimes.*
5. *Grant unhindered access to fact-finding teams, civil rights activists, journalists and human rights defenders to Bastar's militarized mineral-rich regions and elsewhere.*
6. *State must engage in talks with the organization spearheading the movement against mining, deforestation, the establishment of armed forces camps in the area and the construction of roads and bridges and other infrastructure whose sole aim is to facilitate the exploitation of the site by MNCs and the ensuing repression of people by armed forces.*
7. *State must engage in peace talks with CPI (Maoist).*
8. *Immediately stop Operation SAMADHAN-Prahar.*