

Statement against Government of India's planned military offensive in adivasi-populated regions

Sanhati (www.sanhati.com), a collective of activists/academics who have been working in solidarity with peoples' movements in India by providing information and analysis, took the initiative to bring together voices from around the world against the Government of India's planned military offensive in Central India. A statement and a background note were drafted in consultation with Indian activists, and duly circulated for endorsement. Readers are encouraged to endorse by mailing sanhatikolkata@sanhati.com with full name and affiliation. [This version, circulated on Nov. 10, 2009, includes most of the additional signatures submitted up to that point.]

To
Dr. Manmohan Singh
Prime Minister,
Government of India,
South Block, Raisina Hill,
New Delhi,
India-110 011.

We are deeply concerned by the Indian government's plans for launching an unprecedented military offensive by army and paramilitary forces in the adivasi (indigenous people)-populated regions of Andhra Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Orissa and West Bengal states. The stated objective of the offensive is to "liberate" these areas from the influence of Maoist rebels. Such a military campaign will endanger the lives and livelihoods of millions of the poorest people living in those areas, resulting in massive displacement, destitution and human rights violation of ordinary citizens. To hunt down the poorest of Indian citizens in the name of trying to curb the shadow of an insurgency is both counter-productive and vicious. The ongoing campaigns by paramilitary forces, buttressed by anti-rebel militias, organised and funded by government agencies, have already created a civil war like situation in some parts of Chattisgarh and West Bengal, with hundreds killed and thousands displaced. The proposed armed offensive will not only aggravate the poverty, hunger, humiliation and insecurity of the adivasi people, but also spread it over a larger region.

Grinding poverty and abysmal living conditions that has been the lot of India's adivasi population has been complemented by increasing state violence since the neoliberal turn in the policy framework of the Indian state in the early 1990s. Whatever little access the poor had to forests, land, rivers, common pastures, village tanks and other common property resources has come under increasing attack by the Indian state in the guise of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and other "development" projects related to mining, industrial development, Information Technology parks, etc. The geographical terrain, where the government's military offensive is planned to be carried out, is very rich in natural resources like minerals, forest wealth and water, and has been the target of large scale appropriation by several corporations. The desperate resistance of the local indigenous people against

their displacement and dispossession has in many cases prevented the government-backed corporations from making inroads into these areas. We fear that the government's offensive is also an attempt to crush such popular resistances in order to facilitate the entry and operation of these corporations and to pave the way for unbridled exploitation of the natural resources and the people of these regions. It is the widening levels of disparity and the continuing problems of social deprivation and structural violence, and the state repression on the non-violent resistance of the poor and marginalized against their dispossession, which gives rise to social anger and unrest and takes the form of political violence by the poor. Instead of addressing the source of the problem, the Indian state has decided to launch a military offensive to deal with this problem: kill the poor and not the poverty, seems to be the implicit slogan of the Indian government.

We feel that it would deliver a crippling blow to Indian democracy if the government tries to subjugate its own people militarily without addressing their grievances. Even as the short-term military success of such a venture is very doubtful, enormous misery for the common people is not in doubt, as has been witnessed in the case of numerous insurgent movements in the world. We urge the Indian government to immediately withdraw the armed forces and stop all plans for carrying out such military operations that has the potential for triggering a civil war which will inflict widespread misery on the poorest and most vulnerable section of the Indian population and clear the way for the plundering of their resources by corporations. We call upon all democratic-minded people to join us in this appeal.

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[Italian version of Letter here](#) (- Daniela Bezzi)

[Italian version of Background Note here](#)

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BACKGROUND NOTE

It has been widely reported in the press that the Indian government is planning an unprecedented military offensive against alleged Maoist rebels, using paramilitary and counter-insurgency forces, possibly the Indian Armed Forces and even the Indian Air Force. This military operation is going to be carried out in the forested and semi-forested rural areas of the states of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Maharashtra, populated mainly by the tribal (indigenous) people of India. Reportedly, the offensive has been planned in consultation with US counter-insurgency agencies. To put the Indian government's proposed military offensive in proper perspective one needs to understand the economic, social and political background to the conflict. In particular, there are three dimensions of the crisis that needs to be emphasized, because it is often overlooked: (a) the development failure of the post-colonial Indian state, (b) the continued existence and often exacerbation of the structural violence faced by the poor and marginalized, and (c) the full-scale assault on the meager resource base of the peasantry

and the tribal (indigenous people) in the name of "development". Let us look at each of these in turn, but before we do so it needs to be stressed that the facts we mention below are not novel; they are well-known if only conveniently forgotten. Most of these facts were pointed out by the April 2008 Report of the Expert Group of the Planning Commission of the Indian Government (headed by retired civil servant D. Bandopadhyay) to study "development challenges in extremist affected areas".

The post-colonial Indian State, both in its earlier Nehruvian and the more recent neoliberal variant, has failed miserably to solve the basic problems of poverty, employment and income, housing, primary health care, education and inequality and social discrimination of the people of the country. The utter failure of the development strategy of the post-colonial State is the ground on which the current conflict arises. To recount some well known but oft-forgotten facts, recall that about 77 percent of the Indian population in 2004-05 had a per capita daily consumption expenditure of less than Rs. 20; that is less than 50 cents by the current nominal exchange rate between the rupee and the US dollar and about \$2 in purchasing power parity terms. According to the 2001 Census, even 62 years after political independence, only about 42 percent of Indian households have access to electricity. About 80 percent of the households do not have access to safe drinking water; that is a staggering 800 million people lacking access to potable water.

What is the condition of the working people in the country? 93 percent of the workforce, the overwhelming majority of the working people in India, are what the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) called "informal workers"; these workers lack any employment security, work security and social security. About 58 percent of them work in the agricultural sector and the rest is engaged in manufacturing and services. Wages are very low and working conditions extremely onerous, leading to persistent and deep poverty, which has been increasing over the last decade and a half in absolute terms: the number of what the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) called the "poor and vulnerable" increased from 811 million in 1999-00 to 836 million in 2004-05. Since majority of the working people still work in the agricultural sector, the economic stagnation in agriculture is a major cause for the continued poverty of the vast majority of the people. Since the Indian state did not undertake land reforms in any meaningful sense, the distribution of land remains extremely skewed to this day. Close to 60 percent of rural households are effectively landless; and extreme economic vulnerability and despair among the small and marginal peasantry has resulted in the largest wave of suicides in history: between 1997 and 2007, 182,936 farmers committed suicide. This is the economic setting of the current conflict.

But in this sea of poverty and misery, there are two sections of the population that are much worse off than the rest: the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) population. On almost all indicators of social well being, the SCs and STs are worse off than the general population: poverty rates are higher, landlessness is higher, infant mortality rates are higher, levels of formal education are lower, and so on. To understand this differential in social and economic deprivation we need to look at the second aspect of the current crisis that we had alluded to: structural violence.

There are two dimensions of this structural violence: (a) oppression, humiliation and discrimination along the lines of caste and ethnicity and (b) regular harassment, violence and torture by arms of the State. For the SC and ST population, therefore, the violence of poverty, hunger and abysmal living conditions has been complemented and worsened by the structural violence that they encounter daily. It is the combination of the two, general poverty and the brutality and injustice of the age old caste system, kept alive by countless social practices despite numerous legislative measures by the Indian state, that makes this the most economically deprived and socially marginalized section of the Indian population. This social discrimination, humiliation and oppression is of course very faithfully reflected in the behavior of the police and other law-enforcing agencies of the State towards the poor SC and ST population, who are constantly harassed, beaten up and arrested on the slightest pretext. For this population, therefore, the State has not only totally neglected their economic and social development, it is an oppressor and exploiter. While the SC and ST population together account for close to a quarter of the Indian population, they are the overwhelming majority in the areas where the Indian government proposes to carry out its military offensive against alleged Maoist rebels. This, then, is the social background of the current conflict.

This brings us to the third dimension of the problem: unprecedented attack on the access of the marginalized and poor to common property resources. Compounding the persistent poverty and the continuing structural violence has been the State's recent attempt to usurp the meager resource base of the poor and marginalized, a resource base that was so far largely outside the ambit of the market. The neoliberal turn in the policy framework of the Indian state since the mid 1980s has, therefore, only further worsened the problems of economic vulnerability and social deprivation. Whatever little access the poor had to forests, land, rivers, common pastures, village tanks and other common property resources to cushion their inevitable slide into poverty and immiserization has come under increasing attack by the Indian state in the guise of so-called development projects: Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and other "development" projects related to mining, industrial development, Information Technology parks, etc. Despite numerous protests from people and warnings from academics, the Indian State has gone ahead with the establishment of 531 SEZs. The SEZs are areas of the country where labour and tax laws have been consciously weakened, if not totally abrogated by the State to "attract" foreign and domestic capital; SEZs, almost by definition, require a large and compact tract of land, and thus inevitably mean the loss of land, and thus livelihood, by the peasantry. To the best of our knowledge, there have been no serious, rigorous cost-benefit analysis of these projects to date; but this does not prevent the government from claiming that the benefits of these projects, in terms of employment generation and income growth, will far outweigh the costs of revenue loss from foregone taxes and lost livelihoods due to the assault on land.

The opposition to the acquisition of land for these SEZ and similar projects have another dimension to it. Dr. Walter Fernandes, who has studied the process of displacement in post-independence India in great detail, suggests that around 60 million people have faced displacement between 1947 and 2004; this process of displacement has involved about 25 million hectares of land, which includes 7 million hectares of forests and 6 million hectares of other common property resources. How many of these displaced people have been resettled? Only one in every three. Thus, there is every reason for people not to believe the

government's claims that those displaced from their land will be, in any meaningful sense, resettled. This is one of the most basic reasons for the opposition to displacement and dispossession.

But, how have the rich done during this period of unmitigated disaster for the poor? While the poor have seen their incomes and purchasing power tumble down precipitously in real terms, the rich have, by all accounts, prospered beyond their wildest dreams since the onset of the liberalization of the Indian economy. There is widespread evidence from recent research that the levels of income and wealth inequality in India has increased steadily and drastically since the mid 1980s. A rough overview of this growing inequality is found by juxtaposing two well known facts: (a) in 2004-05, 77 percent of the population spent less than Rs. 20 a day on consumption expenditure; and (b) according to the annual World Wealth Report released by Merrill Lynch and Cargemini in 2008, the millionaire population in India grew in 2007 by 22.6 per cent from the previous year, which is higher than in any other country in the world.

It is, thus, the development disaster of the Indian State, the widening levels of disparity and the continuing problems of social deprivation and structural violence when compounded by the all-out effort to restrict access to common property resources that, according to the Expert Group of the Planning Commission, give rise to social anger, desperation and unrest. In almost all cases the affected people try to ventilate their grievances using peaceful means of protest; they take our processions, they sit on demonstrations, they submit petitions. The response of the State is remarkably consistent in all these cases: it cracks down on the peaceful protestors, sends in armed goons to attack the people, slaps false charges against the leaders and arrests them and often also resorts to police firing and violence to terrorize the people. We only need to remember Singur, Nandigram, Kalinganagar and countless other instances where peaceful and democratic forms of protest were crushed by the state with ruthless force. It is, thus, the action of the State that blocks off all forms of democratic protest and forces the poor and dispossessed to take up arms to defend their rights, as has been pointed out by social activists like Arundhati Roy. The Indian government's proposed military offensive will repeat that story all over again. Instead of addressing the source of the conflict, instead of addressing the genuine grievances of the marginalized people along the three dimensions that we have pointed to, the Indian state seems to have decided to opt for the extremely myopic option of launching a military offensive.

It is also worth remembering that the geographical terrain, where the government's military offensive is planned, is very well-endowed with natural resources like minerals, forest wealth, biodiversity and water resources, and has of late been the target of systematic usurpation by several large, both Indian and foreign, corporations. So far, the resistance of the local indigenous people against their displacement and dispossession has prevented the government-backed corporates from exploiting the natural resources for their own profits and without regard to ecological and social concerns. We fear that the government's offensive is also an attempt to crush such democratic and popular resistance against dispossession and impoverishment; the whole move seems to be geared towards facilitating the entry and operation of these large corporations and paving the way for unbridled exploitation of the natural resources and people of these regions.