

'Maoists raising new group'

A bus that was set on fire by alleged Maoists in Bijapur in September 2017. File

A senior Home Ministry official said on Monday that there were reports that Maoists were attempting to raise a new armed group along the Madhya Pradesh-Maharashtra-Chhattisgarh trijunction as they continue to face the heat at their stronghold in Bastar.

The official said the new unit, 'Vistara platoon,' was trying to gain a foothold at the tri-junction, which has lesser deployment of security forces than the seven districts in the Bastar division of Chhattisgarh, said to be one of the last Maoist bastions. "There are multiple reports about Maoists trying to expand at the tri-junction. In the past, there has not been much Maoist activity in this area. This is possibly a strategy, so that security forces lower their guard in Bastar and concentrate on this area instead," the official added.

An official of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) said the forces had opened new camps in the once-inaccessible Bastar region to "squeeze out" the militants.

"Our focus is on the South Bastar-Sukma region and Dantewad and Bastar districts. In the past few months, we have opened three new camps, which would help us in planning operations better and return the same night. With an ability to strike much faster and with an element of surprise," the official said.

There are more than 1.6 lakh CRPF personnel deployed in Chhattisgarh, of which 1.3 lakh concentrate on a 40,000 sq. km. area in Bastar, known for rich mineral deposits of iron ore, granite, tin and corundum.

Part of 'propaganda'

Another official said the expansion plans were part of "propaganda" to recruit more people.

"The recruitment by Maoists is at an all-time low. The composition of Bal Sangams, where they forcibly recruit children, has been dismal in the past two-three years," the official said.

He added that internal documents recovered from Maoist camps showed that there was an attempt to operationalise the Vistara platoon.

"Unlike the tribals in the Bastar area, those living near this tri-junction are more exposed to the outside world and understand Hindi. This is why Maoists are not able to bring more people to their fold," the official said.

He said there had been a churning in the Maoist leadership.

Turf war

The Hindu reported last week that Muppala Lakshman Rao, alias Ganapathi, the elusive head of the banned CPI(Maoist), was making way for his second-in-command and chief of the Central Military Commission Nambala Keshav Rao, alias Basavraj.

Another Maoist leader, Sudhakar Reddy, who moved to Jharkhand two years ago, is learnt to have been siphoning off money from the party fund, the official said.

“He is at loggerheads with Arvind *ji*, a key Maoist leader in Jharkhand, and there was a turf war between the two. Recently, a relative of Mr. Reddy’s was arrested with Rs. 25 lakh in Jharkhand.

Sudhakar Reddy had been asked to transfer the money to his family,” the official said.

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