

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Naxalite violence tests leadership

The government's counterattack will stress development as well as law and order.

The year-end kidnaping of seven state government officials in Andhra Pradesh by an armed band belonging to the People's War Group (PWG) of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) highlighted an apparent resurgence of left-extremist activity in India.

The terrorists demanded the release of seven of their comrades held in judicial custody as the price for their hostages' lives. After about 48 hours of suspense, during which time the central government had dispatched six planeloads of central reserve police troops for use in a hostage-rescue mission, the drama was ended with a peaceful exchange of the terrorist prisoners for the hostages.

This is the first time that nearly the entirety of a district administration was taken hostage—and that too in a state ruled by the opposition, Andhra Pradesh's Chief Minister N.T. Rama Rao's Telegu Desam, and the incident sparked a barrage of controversy.

In the end, the central government declined to play politics, and amended its original statement condemning the kidnaping and vowing strong countermeasures. "Our policy is clear," stated Union Minister of State for Home Affairs P. Chidambaram. "In the long run, there is no question of appeasement of terrorism. But the particular situation in Andhra Pradesh is something for the state government to judge."

The Andhra Pradesh PWG is one of the more powerful of the remaining factions of the Naxalite movement, named for Naxalbari village in West Bengal, where it erupted in the late

1960s as a Maoist breakaway from the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M).

The movement for "agrarian revolution" was physically crushed in West Bengal in the early 1970s, and its political remains buried by the agricultural and other reforms carried out by the CPI-M government when it came to power in 1977. By then, however, amid ideological fissuring and sectarian squabbling, the "Naxalite movement" had spread to other parts of the country.

Today, the CPI-Marxist-Leninist is part of the same "International," with strings from London and Moscow, as the narco-terrorist Shining Path of Peru.

In Punjab, the Naxalites folded themselves into Sikh separatist ranks. In other areas—notably Bihar, sections of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh. Where disenfranchised peasants and tribals continue to suffer acutely, the Naxalite splinters found a solid base as defenders of the downtrodden against exploitation by landlords, venal bureaucrats, local officials, and corrupt police.

In Andhra Pradesh, the Naxalites have been active in 10 districts, mostly densely forested areas populated by tribal people. With an estimated membership of 5,000 statewide (500 hard core), the movement is split into a dozen different groups, four of which are dominant and active. Their armed gangs have murdered some 200 people, including 35 policemen, in the last four years—62 in 1987 alone.

The recent increase in violence, as

the latest incident points to the Naxalites' political desperation. Significant programs to promote tribal development, freeing tribals from the clutches of unscrupulous forest contractors, have been successfully implemented in Andhra Pradesh in the past several years. The officials taken hostage on Dec. 27 had just spent the day discussing the status of the programs with some 400 tribals.

The opening up of genuine opportunities for progress for landless peasants and tribals poses a mortal danger to the Naxalite cause. In the face of such developments, the Naxalites drop the Robin Hood mask, resisting any change in the oppressive status quo by criminal force.

This reality informs the central government's mooted plan for a "two-pronged counterattack"—combining modernized enforcement capabilities with reappraisal of the design and implementation of local development programs.

Interestingly, the Moscow-tied Communist Party of India (CPI) has not missed the opportunity to try to swell the ranks of those peacefully resisting change. The CPI demanded the Andhra Pradesh government declare a general amnesty for all Naxalite criminals, and appealed to the PWG to give up arms and join "the mainstream of left forces."

In Bihar, the other active Naxalite center, the problem is somewhat different. There, where some 15 districts of central Bihar are virtually controlled by three different terrorist groups, the issue is land ownership. Land reform legislation has remained strictly on paper, and caste-related warfare over land is a way of life in which the Naxalites have become the hired guns of some caste groups, usually lower-caste groups, against others.