

# Open Letters to Government and Maoists

*The Independent Citizens' Initiative, which recently visited Dantewada district in Chhattisgarh to obtain first hand knowledge of the Salwa Judum and how the government-CPI (Maoist) conflict was affecting the adivasis writes open letters to the government and the Maoists.*

## **Appeal to the Government**

To  
The prime minister, government of India  
chief minister, government of Chhattisgarh

**A**s we visited different parts of Dantewada district in Chhattisgarh from May 17 to May 22, 2006 and met with a cross-section of people with different perspectives on the ongoing conflict in the district. In particular, we met a large number of adivasis in their villages, in relief camps and in jail. We also met the chief secretary and other senior officials, the collectors of Dantewada and Bastar, the IG of police at Jagdalpur, and Mahendra Karma, the leader of the opposition in the assembly and the prime mover of Salwa Judum.

Our views and findings are briefly as follows:

– At the very outset, we wish to register our outright condemnation of any kind of

violence, whether it is committed by the Maoists, Salwa Judum or by security forces and the police. We are aware that the Maoists have committed several brutal acts of violence in which innocent lives have been lost. We whole-heartedly condemn such brutalities.

– At the same time, we wish to state here that any counter-insurgency operation founded on violence in response to violence is totally unsustainable, especially when it fails to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants. By resorting to such an approach, the government is questioning the efficacy of democratic means of finding solutions to problems and of all lawful procedures. It is justifying the Maoist notion that ultimately only the gun has power.

– From what we have seen, Salwa Judum is not the “spontaneous peoples’ movement” it is made out to be. It appears to be fully sponsored and supported by various government agencies.

– The local civil administration is in a state of collapse. The Salwa Judum has been taken over by lumpen elements prone to running a parallel administration, which is completely unaccountable. The leadership of the Salwa Judum appears to be drawn from the very section that has been responsible for exploiting the adivasis. Unless Salwa Judum is disbanded forthwith, the government will lose all control.

– While the acts of violence committed by the Maoists are reported, there has been no recognition of similar acts committed by Salwa Judum, the local police or the paramilitary forces. We have ourselves come across several unrecorded instances of killing, gang rape and other violence against women, arson, looting and forced displacement of villagers committed by Salwa Judum workers and the paramilitary forces. The deaths are said to number in the hundreds. Many adivasis are languishing in jails for months on false charges. Many are missing. In those cases, no magisterial enquiries, mandatory under the law of the land, have ever been conducted. An independent and impartial inquiry alone would reveal the nature and magnitude of violence and the identity of the culprits in each case.

– Salwa Judum has spread an all-pervasive fear and terror not just among adivasis, but also among journalists, shopkeepers, bus drivers, etc. All those that fail to side with the Judum are at once termed “Maoist” and brutally dealt with. It is essential to maintain a distinction between civilians and combatants.

– Minors are being armed (with .303s) and made to man checkpoints. Civilians, especially minors, cannot be used as shields or sub-stitutes for military or police forces. By using civilians as combatants the Salwa Judum has fractured tribal society grievously.

– We found very little sensitivity towards adivasi problems in terms of food security, health, education and control over natural resources. Instead, we found prejudice, condescension and disregard for people’s basic rights – the very attitudes that drove them to support the Maoists in the first place. The government appears to have no solution regarding the livelihood needs of people resettled along the road.

– The Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act, 2005 creates a wide scope for human rights violations that make a mockery of the democratic norms enshrined in our Constitution.

Against this background, we earnestly appeal to the central and state governments to proceed as follows:

(1) Keeping in view the enormous havoc that it has already caused, disband Salwa Judum with immediate effect. (2) Enable the adivasis in the relief camps to return to their villages before the monsoon sets in, so that they can attend to their agricultural activities. (3) Institute an independent and credible enquiry into all incidents of violence committed by any organisation, whether it is the Maoists, the local police, the paramilitary forces or Salwa Judum and take stringent action against all those concerned. (4) Shun violence as part of the counter-insurgency strategy and, instead, recognise the urgent socio-economic factors that lie at the core of adivasi concerns. (5) Announce a comprehensive set of confidence-building measures under Schedule V of the Constitution and accord unambiguous recognition to the adivasi entitlement over natural resources, viz, land, forest, minerals, etc. (6) Restore good governance in the district by replacing its senior functionaries by those with proven track record, aptitude and sensitivity in addressing adivasi problems. (7) Repeal the Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act, 2005 and (8) Announce an unconditional ceasefire and call the Maoists for a National Dialogue on all issues that concern the well-being of the people in general, and adivasis in particular. Since both the Maoist threat and tribal concerns go beyond the political boundaries of Chhattisgarh, it is imperative that these are addressed at the national level, collectively by the central and the state governments.

We believe that, as a democratically elected entity, the central and the state governments will heed our appeal. We have separately issued an open letter to the CPI(Maoist).

### ***Appeal to the CPI(Maoist)***

To  
General Secretary  
CPI (Maoist)

During our visit to Dantewada we met with a cross-section of people with different perspectives on the ongoing conflict in the district. We met a large number of adivasis, in the villages, in relief camps and in jails. We feel deeply distressed at the plight of the adivasis in Dantewada and, in that context, we make this earnest appeal to you.

We believe that the well-being and all-round development of the adivasis in

Dantewada and elsewhere should be the central theme of any discussion or effort that has had an impact on their lives, either directly or indirectly. We also believe that the defence of the rights of the adivasis can be ensured more effectively through political, non-violent and open means, rather than through armed struggle.

What is happening today in Dantewada is truly traumatic for the adivasis. The majority stand deprived of their basic entitlements in terms of land and other natural resources, education, health, food security, etc, either due to the apathy and insensitivity of the state, exploitation by outsiders, or because of the restrictions imposed by you. Due to the violence unleashed by the government and government-supported Salwa Judum movement and the atmosphere of fear and uncertainty created by your violent response, the situation in Dantewada is near civil war. We condemn both kinds of violence. Adivasi society is deeply divided. This is a situation that cannot and should not be allowed to go on. We hold all concerned, namely, the government, the government-sponsored Salwa Judum movement and the Maoists responsible for this unfortunate situation. Every one of you should own up to this and come forward to resolve the crisis through discussion and dialogue.

Based on our visit, we have a number of questions we would like to pose to you: – Several organisations – An All India Fact Finding Team (PUCL, PUDR, APDR,

IAPL), Human Rights Forum, Asian Centre for Human Rights and the Independent Citizens Initiative – have called upon you to declare a ceasefire with the government in Chhattisgarh and engage in dialogue. You have not responded to this call. On the contrary, you have escalated violence, and killed Salwa Judum members in retaliation, often very brutally. Are you prepared to engage in dialogue?

– We are worried at your casual attitude towards taking away life. Deaths, like that of the marriage party returning from Gadchiroli or of the traders in Kanker are treated as “mistakes”. Unfortunately, armed struggle leads to too many “mistakes”. Should this not lead to a reconsideration of strategy? In any case, what does a “mistake” really mean? We do not condone the killing of policemen either on moral or political grounds, especially given that many people join the police or forces only as a means of employment.

– Regarding the ‘jan adalat’ held in Manikonta in which 13 villagers were brutally killed – what gives the villagers or the party the right to impose death sentences? Is a death penalty the only penalty possible? Where is the evidence that due process was followed in these so-called jan adalats?

– Why have you laid mines all over, a weapon which people throughout the world have condemned as indiscriminate and actually want banned? Mines will not

prevent Salwa Judum, but will only endanger the lives of ordinary people.

– Why do you train minors (under 18) in the use of arms? Why do you have to destroy schools, even if the CRPF uses them? Will this not affect education in the long-term to the detriment of the adivasis?

– Not all the lack of development can be blamed on the government. People have a right to vote, to work on road construction schemes, to access panchayat money, all of which your party has opposed. Even if your party builds a thousand irrigation ponds and runs schools, can you ever replace the resources that the government has, and to which people have a right?

– While your armed squads may be ready to face military operations and death, why put people at such risk? You claim that if it were not for repression by the state, people would be fully with you. By taking up armed struggle, are you not inviting greater repression?

– Are you not subordinating the interests of the people of Bastar and Dantewada to your wider goal of violent state capture, a goal that they may not fully share? While there may be a great deal of support for your party, how does one measure this in any independently verifiable fashion? Are you prepared to demonstrate that through impartially conducted polls?

– All those who claim to struggle for the people must struggle responsibly and with full accountability. There must be a distinction between civilians and combatants. Today, due to both the Salwa Judum and due to your response, such a distinction does not exist.

We appeal to you to respond to our call for a national dialogue, announce a ceasefire and agree to be party to any approach that benefits the adivasis and enhances their well-being.

We have appealed to the central and the state governments through a similar open letter to disband Salwa Judum, announce an unconditional ceasefire, come up with confidence-building measures for the benefit of the adivasis and initiate a national dialogue with you.

[The signatories to the appeals are Ramachandra Guha (historian and columnist, Bangalore), Harivansh (editor, *Prabhat Khabar*, Ranchi), Farah Naqvi (writer and social activist, New Delhi), E A S Sarma (former secretary, government of India, Visakhapatnam), Nandini Sundar (professor of sociology, Delhi University), and B G Verghese (former editor, *Hindustan Times*, *Indian Express*, New Delhi).] **END**