

Road ahead: Green Hunt made tough

Few cops, fear and lack of familiarity

Raipur, Nov. 4 [2009]: Perhaps the best way to understand the security offensive mounted to defeat the Maoist challenge is not to seek answers but to merely ponder the many questions that riddle the project.

It's well-nigh impossible to script a "Green Hunt Made Easy" because, quite simply, it isn't an easy undertaking; "Green Hunt Made Tough" is more readily done, and it serves as a better reckoner of what lies ahead.

Many of those who've put Green Hunt into motion and will shortly join forces with the paramilitary to upgrade the push against armed Maoists are themselves balked by the steep degree of difficulty they have undertaken to manoeuvre.

"It's like an impossibly revolving door," says a police officer currently working the logistics of operations. "You go in looking for answers and you are pushed right out under a barrage of questions there are no answers to."

Did you know, for instance, that Chhattisgarh can afford only one policeman per four square kilometers?

Did you know that in Bastar, the core and fount of Maoist militancy, that ratio gets drastically thinner — only one policeman per nine square kilometers?

Did you know that eight out of 10 jawans — police or paramilitary — drafted for the frontlines will have little or no knowledge of the territory and people they are meant to establish domination over?

Did you know that no more than 800 of the 5,000 jawans specially trained in jungle warfare by the Chhattisgarh government last year are deputed to counter-insurgency tasks? (The rest are, where else, manning VVIP security)

Did you know that the 35 new anti-Naxalite battalions the government is meant to raise for operations will take a minimum of three years to turn into functioning boots on the ground?

Did you know that the security forces have virtually no real-time intelligence to work on because the Maoists' jungle bases defy air surveillance and the human information network is in a shambles?

Did you know that 95 per cent of the area that the security forces need to “reclaim” from Maoist control has no roads, not even kuchcha tracks? And that they have very little sense of the lay of the land in Maoist-controlled areas?

Did you know that for fear of the Maoists, building contractors have refused to undertake construction work in interior Bastar — key roads, new police stations, paramilitary camps — even though the government has offered them ten times the going rate?

Did you know that malaria is felling as many jawans in the jungles as Maoists and the government often has no means of evacuating those taken ill in the interiors?

Did you know that Orissa, a key Naxalite-affected state, has politely begged off the joint security operations, stating its police force is currently not up to the challenge? And that operations in Jharkhand too will have to remain virtually suspended because of impending Assembly elections?

Those that are participating — a new joint command centre has been set up at the Police HQ in Raipur and the first induction meetings with paramilitary forces held — are not making Green Hunt yet tougher.

Consider, for instance, that among the priority requirements the Chhattisgarh police brass are scrambling to meet in the midst of battling the Maoists are R & R (rest and recreation) facilities for paramilitary bosses who are leading their men into jungle locations --- commodious accommodation, which means the bar cannot go lower than cable television and air-conditioning (even though this is the onset of winter and the weather has already turned rather pleasant).

The care-and-comfort demands provoked a senior police official enough to say: “Instead of giving the Maoists a run, these para guys are putting a run on the air-conditioner market in off-season, what do they assume they are here for, a paid picnic?”

Another officer spoke of the “palpable disinterest” among some paramilitary brass in the “mandatory requirement” of orienting themselves to the job ahead. “Bastar has been the Waterloo of many a reputed force, the Naga Armed Police came here and everybody thought they would saw through the Maoists because they come from a proven jungle combat experience. They’ve returned, the Maoists are still flourishing. People who come here thinking they know it all will provide us rude shocks, nothing more,” complained an officer who has engaged with newly arrived paramilitary bosses on preparations for the joint offensive.

The Chhattisgarh government runs a singular jungle warfare and counter-terrorism training facility at Kanker, midway between Raipur and the Bastar heartland, but the sense emerging from initial interactions between the state police and paramilitary officials is that the latter are reluctant to train in specific combat requirements for engaging Maoist guerrillas.

Brigadier B.D. Ponwar, who runs the Kanker training college — a sprawling and quite impressive centre almost single-handedly erected by the former army man — is openly dismissive about the “know-alls” in the security establishment who are reluctant to train.

“I have been here several years now, and I can tell you that the highest security casualties happen because people are not trained to meet requirements of this terrain and of fighting Maoists,” Brig Ponwar says.

“Look up the records and you will find that the very few who have trained here have been killed in combat. It’s about task-oriented training, that simple. And a pity that people are not bothered to take advantage of an institution that will provide them that expertise. Arrogance will lose us this campaign if nothing else will.”

Did you know that senior security personnel have, in the past, declined jungle warfare courses at Kanker only because it provides only tented accommodation — no air-conditioning, no cable TV — for the very logical reason that it is a jungle warfare school, not an R&R retreat?

No wonder ‘Green Hunt Made Tough’ is easier to draft.

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