

'When I got to my village, all the houses had been burned'

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The 30-year Maoist insurgency in Chhattisgarh has sparked a vicious response from the security forces and untold numbers of hidden victims, writes **ERIC RANDOLPH** in Andhra Pradesh, India

STANDING AMID the rubble of his former home, three-year-old Kattam Suresh is living proof of the horrors of the civil war raging in the state of Chhattisgarh.

Eighteen months ago, security forces came to his tiny village of Gompar in the forests of Dantewada and killed nine people, including Suresh's mother, aunt and grandparents. They knocked out Suresh's teeth, cut off three of his fingers and tossed him on to the body of his dying mother.

The security forces were looking for Maoist rebels, who have been deeply entrenched in the region for 30 years, fighting for the rights of tribal villagers but increasingly forced into a war of attrition with the security forces, who treat everyone in the Maoist zone as a potential insurgent.

The violence has forced thousands of tribal villagers to flee across the border to Andhra Pradesh. Local charities have counted 16,000 refugees in the single district of Khammam. They estimate over 30,000 more are hiding in the surrounding forests.

Sodi Shankar, from Neelam Madugu, looks barely 16, but he has had a lifetime of trauma. He fled Chhattisgarh with his family four years ago after watching a young girl being shot and axed to death by security forces and members of the Salwa Judum, a notorious anti-Maoist militia that was set up by local elites in 2005 to regain control of the region.

Last year, he was picked up by police when he tried to return to his family. He demonstrates how two men tortured him with an iron bar, scraping it along his legs, tearing the skin and tissue. The scars are still visible on his shins.

"They accused me of being a Maoist. They kept me in a government hospital, handcuffed to the bed. After two weeks, they said they would do a deal: if I told them where the other villagers are hiding, then once they had all been killed I would get a promotion and be part of their police force." He was let go after his sister begged for his release, telling his captors the family no longer lived in the state. They were warned never to return.

Shankar now lives in one of 200 refugee settlements in Khammam.

Every family bears the psychological scars of their escape. While some fled violence by the Maoists – particularly the wealthier ones – the vast majority say they were displaced by the violence of the security forces and the Salwa Judum (which translates as "purification hunt" in the local Gondi dialect).

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“The Judum came suddenly to where three of us were fishing on a lake,” recounts Musaki Aramaya of Balmera village. “They shot my two friends and dragged me away. They dragged me by my hair, tearing it out.

“They put me in a hut in their camp. A woman told me that they were planning to kill me, so I managed to pull the tiles off the roof and escape. When I got back to my village, all the houses had been burned down.”

In January, the Chhattisgarh government was ordered by the Indian supreme court to show how it would compensate all those affected by violence, but officials deny they need to do anything.

Vishwa Ranjan, director-general of Chhattisgarh police, says: “We have had a compensation package from the very beginning. People can apply to their local collector and they will immediately get compensation.”

Critics say this means dealing with the very people they accuse of orchestrating the violence.

Nandini Sundar, a Delhi University professor spearheading the case against the government, has collected evidence of 537 murders, 99 rapes and the destruction of 2,814 homes between just 2005 and 2007.

The Salwa Judum has officially been disbanded, but many of its members were simply co-opted as semi-official police officials.

Local news reports suggest little has changed: a five-day police operation in Dantewada last month reportedly led to the death of three villagers and the destruction of up to 300 homes.

“There’s been a complete media black-out – nobody knows the court has ordered compensation,” Dr Sundar says. “The government has never advertised how people can submit claims and nothing has come of the few claims that have been made.”

For most refugees, fleeing the war zone was only the start of their problems.

Unwanted by the Andhra Pradesh authorities, they were denied work permits and ration cards. Conditions in the settlements are appalling. The children all show signs of malnutrition, many with skin diseases and distended bellies.

ActionAid and its local partner, the Agricultural and Social Development Society, supply rations to young mothers and children, but they have only enough resources to reach 22 of the 203 settlements.

“We had another village near here but two years ago the forest officials came and burned down two huts and sent everyone out,” says Kosoya Kota, who claims he has been beaten by forest officials three times. “When there is work to be done, they come for us and expect

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He says that only two months ago, the forest officials came and took away all his farming equipment and 10 kilos of rice he had stored. He shows us where they chopped at his front door with an axe. "They said they were punishing us for clearing some land to grow crops, Kosoya adds, "but we have babies to feed. What are we supposed to do?"

Ramesh Khilgali, head of the state's forestry department, admits his officers have "an unpleasant job", but says the state has lost 10,000 acres to encroachers in the past five years and action needs to be taken.

"It is hard for me to keep track of what happens in a remote village. We do try to train our people not to do these things and things have improved recently, but however much of a smiling face we present, it will always be an unpleasant task."

The refugees are easy targets for unscrupulous employers. When a group of seven men recently travelled to the state capital of Hyderabad, they ended up as prisoners in a factory.

"We were picked up by a rickshaw driver who promised to find us work," says Madavi Andama, who estimates his age at about 25, "but the manager took all our money and our belongings and refused to let us leave. We were locked in the factory at night and they told us we would be put behind bars if we tried to escape."

The men were finally allowed to make a phone call and managed to contact one of the charity co-ordinators in their village, who organised their rescue.

Government officers admit they have trouble meeting basic demands in tribal areas, let alone dealing with refugees. "These areas have been neglected for a very long time," says Pravin Kumar of the official Integrated Tribal Development Agency.

"Literacy is still below 30 per cent. They score poorly on every human development indicator, but to put these areas on a par with the mainstream, we need twice the resources we have now.

"As for the IDPs [internally displaced persons], there is still no policy from the government on how to deal with them. The police see them as Maoist sympathisers and the forest department see them as encroachers. Slowly, these things are starting to change, but the pace is the problem."

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