

Final Interim Report of an Independent Citizens' Team from Kolkata

on the Current State of Affairs in Nandigram

30 November 2007

As a result of an initiative instituted by women's groups, women's organizations and individuals, an eleven member women's team of concerned citizens from Kolkata comprising teachers, social activists, researchers and students visited Nandigram, on November 24, 2007. Concerned about the repeated disruption of peace in the region, the members decided to visit the affected areas and talk to the local people, with the objectives of showing solidarity with the survivors of violence, documenting people's needs in the current circumstances, and drawing up recommendations based on our understanding of the situation.

The people who constituted this team were Kavita Panjabi, Anuradha Kapoor, Rajashri Dasgupta, Saswati Ghosh, Shyamoli Das, Swapna Banerjee, Trina Nileena Banerjee, Shuktara Lal, Sushmita Sinha, Shubhasree Bhattacharya and Sourinee Mirdha.

On arrival in Nandigram at the Relief Camp at Brij Mohan Tiwari Shiksha Niketan, the team split into two groups. One talked to the people in the Relief Camp, the other to a woman who had been sexually assaulted, and the injured in Nandigram Hospital. One group then proceeded to the villages of Sonachura and Garchakraberia, also stopping at the Bhangaberia Bridge where the CRPF is stationed; the other half of the team went to the village of Daudpur.

This interim report comprises the general findings and recommendations of all the members of the team that visited Nandigram on the 24th of November. The specific testimonies and individual stories will be included in the final report.

PRIMARY FINDINGS:

- 1) Overall there is a reign of terror; the people are marked by deep fear, disillusionment and depression. Since January, Nandigram has been marked by the violence of the State in tandem with the ruling CPI(M),

and the retaliatory attacks by the BUPC¹. The massive attack of the state on the BUPC procession in March 14th, 2007, clearly violated all democratic norms and involved armed police, para-military forces, as well as armed party cadres, including rampant shooting and widespread sexual abuse of women. Subsequently, in numerous villages post March 14, there were reports that many CPI(M) supporters were forced to flee to relief camps in Khejuri and that their homes were ransacked and looted by BUPC supporters. There has been continued violence since on both sides. However, the build up in the area of the CPI(M) militia, the *Harmad Bahini*, the brutal firing by CPI(M) cadres on November 6, 2007 of BUPC members in Satengabari, Ranichak, Bhangabera and Sonachura, and the torching of nine villages including Simulkunda and Satengabari, followed by the attack on November 10, 2007 at Maheshpur village in Nandigram, when armed CPI(M) cadres fired bullets indiscriminately at a peace rally organised by BUPC with the police taking no steps to intervene, all demonstrate the scale and might of the violence exercised by the ruling CPI(M), with the full support of the State.

- 2) The people of Nandigram are now living in terror of the CPI(M) which has now taken over most of the Nandigram villages and is out to extract vengeance on the BUPC and its supporters. Criminals who have killed, sexually assaulted and injured people continue to threaten the population of the villages. Many who had tried to return to their villages but had to come back to the Relief Camp spoke of bombs and firing that they heard even on the 23rd night when they had tried to return to their homes. And the night-time threats, especially against women, also continue. Across all the villages, people testified to the complete loss of political freedom – they are being forced to pledge their allegiance to one particular party or the other, and they talked angrily about their right to decide which party they wanted to support. The people in the camp, as well as the majority in the villages, have lost all confidence in the government, administration and police.

¹ The Bhumi Uchhed Pratirodh Committee (BUPC) is a committee formed by people across the villages of Nandigram in January 2007, to represent the people's movement against the complete absence of democratic processes in the state's move to acquire land for setting up an SEZ. While the state has subsequently announced a withdrawal of its plans to build an SEZ here, the people of Nandigram have no faith in this declaration as they have received no official document to that effect as yet. Nandigram had been a predominantly CPI(M) area till the beginning of this year. The BUPC membership cut across all political parties and included supporters of the ruling CPI(M), the TMC, the BJP, and the SUCI, and the people adopted a black flag as symbol of the BUPC to emphasize its independence as a committee beyond any particular party affiliation. Across the year the TMC has gained force in Nandigram and taken over the BUPC leadership.

- 3) At the Relief Camp at Brij Mohan Tiwari Shiksha Niketan in Nandigram town, villagers testified to rampant firing, brutal killing and large-scale threats by the cadres of the CPI(M), the ruling party, across the villages of Gokulnagar, Kalicharanpur, Adhikaripara, Simulkunda and Satengabari. About 20-25,000 people have left their homes according to people in the camps. Of them, 3000 to 3500 people had been living in this camp approximately 1500 of whom were still there on 24th November. The People's Health doctors working in the Relief Camp said they had not received any complaints of sexual or physical assault, but mainly children's health related complaints, like cough, fever, diarrhoea. However, many people in the camps carried scars of deep bullet injuries on their faces, stomachs and legs and women told us about a woman who had been gang raped in Satengabari by 6-7 men, who is now in Tamluk hospital. Both her daughters, one about 17, one younger, were abducted. They are still missing. Further, hundreds of women who had fled Kalicharanpur, Adhikaripara, Simulkunda and Satengabari in fear of sexual assault were still in the Nandigram camp. They testified that not only had their homes been looted and burnt down, in villages like Satengabari they had also been severely threatened by CPI(M) cadres, who came around saying "We'll come back at night – light your lamps and wait for us with open doors. Send your men away, we'll come back to you at night." "How can we stay in a place under such threats?" the women asked. Women of these villages are still living in fear of being sexually abused, and young girls have been sent to relatives' homes elsewhere. The fear and insecurity of the villagers – especially the women at the Nandigram camp – has been so high that they have refused to go back to their villages till the CRPF is posted there to ensure their safety and protect them from the violent vengeance of the *Harmad Bahini* comprising CPI(M) cadres.
- 4) Extensive physical abuse and sexual abuse of women, ranging from rape and forcing of rods into women's vaginas, to rampant sexual harassment, as well as abduction of girls has been reported since March this year, but not much has been done to provide relief to the women, or to initiate investigation against and punish the perpetrators. Such violence against women continues, accompanied by terrifying threats, and there is no evidence of any steps having been taken to curb either.

- 5) Some of the people who had participated in the unarmed march to Maheshpur on 10th November were arrested and locked up for three days in the school building. The women were subjected to repeated sexual harassment by male CPI(M) cadres who claimed the women were Maoists.
- 6) In villages such as Garchakraberia, where the CRPF has already been posted, normal life and activity seem to have returned; however, there is simmering tension and fear under the facade of peace. At night, when CRPF personnel go off vigil, assailants begin their attacks again; so people have been forced to flee their homes at night and take shelter elsewhere from fear of reprisal. Villagers claim this is a forced calm and are terrified of what may happen when the CRPF is withdrawn.
- 7) Some residents of Sonachura also expressed their anger and frustration at the TMC leaders of the BUPC for keeping their own women safe at home, while forcing other women in the villages to join the BUPC marches and threatening to beat and burn down the homes of all who refused. Many people in Sonachura were also scared of admitting to the violence they have faced from the CPI(M), claiming that they had been threatened into silence.
- 8) The situation in Daudpur is still very tense and the administration should take immediate measures to address this. There is resentment and anger brewing among the villagers. People openly accuse each other of violence while questioning the authority and corruption of particular CPI(M) leaders. Some villagers also claimed that the BUPC forced people to volunteer to stand as night guards against the armed attacks from CPI(M)'s *Harmad Bahini* after 28 October.
- 9) Villagers testified that the police are playing a partisan role. BUPC members returning to their villages were being arrested, some on false charges. Others are being levied exorbitant "fines" to "compensate for the damages done to the CPI(M) families in the last 11 months." Complaints about the atrocities of the CPI(M) followers were either not registered, or the accused were released after being arrested, without any of the legal procedures being followed.
- 10) The senior police officer at the Relief Camp refused to comment on most of our questions. He i) hinted at pressure from some political parties ii) implied that work was being made "difficult" due to "interference" iii) said peace is returning to the villages, but the situation is "still difficult".

- 11) While language is proving to be a barrier for the CRPF in dealing with the volatile situation here, there are apparent efforts to restore peace, including red-flag processions etc. But the atmosphere outside the temporary 'protection' of the Relief Camp is of extreme terror. In spite of all apparent efforts and assurance on the part of the authorities, this terror is persistent.
- 12) There is a tremendous breakdown of trust. The villages of Nandigram are zones of pregnant silence today – they are zones of seething fear, terror, suspicion and threat. Common people are suffering and living in fear and their tragedy is heightened because of the partisan role played by the police

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Non-partisan, just and effective action on the part of the State is the most basic and critical factor for restoring peace in Nandigram. The government must strengthen administrative structures and ensure impartial and immediate action on the part of the administration to instill confidence in the people and normalize the situation in Nandigram. Conditions must be created for people to renew their daily social and economic activities without fear and apprehension of reprisal.
2. The violence in Nandigram must be stopped. i) All arms in the possession of the entire population of all the villages of Nandigram must be confiscated. ii) The area must be rid of all outside cadres. iii) All criminals, irrespective of political affiliation must be arrested immediately and tried; and iv) effective vigilance should be set in place against all those indulging in retaliatory and revengeful acts that will derail the peace process.
3. We demand responsible action now from all the political parties too. They must stop exploiting the situation, abstain from violence, and play a constructive role in bringing peace back to Nandigram. .
4. Rape and sexual assault have clearly become dominant weapons of war in the crossfire between vested political interests in Nandigram. i) Urgent measures must be taken by the administration and the police to stop this immediately. ii) Perpetrators have been resorting to sexual assault on women to intimidate, humiliate and subjugate the opposition, while the opposition has been using incidents of rape to discredit the perpetrators, not to seek justice for the women affected. We demand a complete and immediate stop to such practices and to all threats of sexual violence too.

5. The administration should also ensure that all rape cases are registered, thoroughly investigated, and followed up. Cases where women have been brutally assaulted should also receive the attention they merit and should not be brushed aside merely because the case was not one of rape. Sexual assault is a serious offence and must be dealt with as such. All victims of sexual assault must be provided immediate medical treatment and their privacy respected and dignity upheld.
 6. Both men, and large numbers of women, especially those subject to sexual assault and/or rape, are now severely traumatized and have sunk into visibly deep depression or shock. The government should set up a counselling cell in Nandigram or authorize an NGO to do so for the purpose of trauma alleviation.
 7. Those who are suffering from the latest violence, as well as those who have been injured earlier in the year, cannot afford the medication required. Many cannot work as they could earlier. On both counts, their livelihood is adversely affected. Compensation to the injured and raped, and to the families of the dead should be made available on an urgent footing. Women and children have been the worst sufferers of the violence; attention should be paid to their special needs, and efforts made to restore their dignity and confidence in the process of rehabilitation. The SDO/BDO should ensure that the grant promised to repair houses must be distributed without any partisan preference.
 8. The presence of the CRPF can ensure only a temporary and forced calm. This is no solution to the reign of terror. The state must set in place peacemaking efforts, and involve all political parties and people's organisations in the region to renew the democratic process and enable citizens to reclaim the lost democratic space for a lasting and just peace in the area. People's political rights must be ensured. Democracy does not mean the rule of the majority, but ensuring the rights and respect of the minority and those holding opposing political opinions and beliefs too. Concerted efforts have to be made, across all political differences, to control the spate of vengeance, and rebuild the confidence of the people of Nandigram who are living with violence as well as the fear of violence on a day to day basis.
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