

Maoist presence?

THE absolute secrecy maintained by the Dongria Kondh is not without reason. Recent reports in the local media suggest a Maoist presence in the Niyamgiri area. Journalists in Bhawanipatna, the headquarters of Kalahandi district, say that the Orissa government is in the process of declaring Niyamgiri a Maoist-affected area. The Central Reserve Police Force has been deployed in neighbouring Muniguda block in Rayagada district.

Thirty-five per cent of Niyamgiri falls in Kalahandi district and the rest under Rayagada district, which has officially been declared a Maoist-affected area. An atmosphere of fear and paranoia is evident even in Bhawanipatna. Several police checkpoints have been put up in and around the small town to scan people and vehicles regularly. Sanjeev Panda, Deputy Inspector General of Police of Koraput range, confirmed the deployment of troops at Muniguda but expressed ignorance about the presence of Maoists in Niyamgiri. "I am not aware of any Maoist presence in Niyamgiri," he told *Frontline*. "Yes, troops have

been deployed in Muniguda, but they are not for Niyamgiri."

Reliable sources, however, said the government would soon start combing operations in the manner of Operation Green Hunt in Niyamgiri, which the tribal people say definitely will result in a "war".

An official of Vedanta claimed that the tribal people were a threat to national security even as he lashed out at a report brought out by Amnesty International, titled "Don't mine us out of existence". "The report amounts to contempt of court as the issues raised in it have already been considered by the Supreme Court. Amnesty has blamed the Orissa government and the Government of India for not granting territorial rights to Adivasis which is a serious threat to the security of the country. Further, like the United States, Australia, France, Japan and China, India is not a signatory to the International Labour Organisation treaty on indigenous people, which proves that the Amnesty report is absolutely baseless," said the official.

Mahim Pratap Singh

danta is an enemy, a foreign monster that has come here to destroy us," says Lahadi Sikoka, a villager, sharpening a wooden stick with his axe. Thousands of others of his tribe, spread across over a 100 villages in Niyamgiri, share the same sentiment.

It is common for the Dongria Kondh to carry some weapon or the other at all times to survive against attacks from wild animals, which are aplenty in Niyamgiri. It could be an axe, a bow and arrows or even a crude gun. Niyamgiri means the mount of Niyam Raja, the law god of the Dongria Kondh, whom they also worship as their king and ancestor. While the company maintains that there is no

habitation on the mountain top, which is the proposed mining area, the Kondh people believe it to be the abode of Niyam Raja.

According to the residents of Jarpa village, Niyamgiri is a sacred place for them, a bank that provides them with everything they need. Salt and oil are the only things they need to get from outside.

The CEC report to the Supreme Court in 2005 strongly recommended against allowing mining in the Niyamgiri hills. It observed, among other things, that the rich biodiversity of Niyamgiri (which also happens to be an elephant reserve) would be under serious threat from the company's mining

activities. According to the report, the forest "contains sambar, leopard, tiger, barking deer, various species of birds and other endangered species of wildlife...it has more than 300 species of plants and trees, including about 50 species of medicinal plants".

Nalli, which is the Kuvi (the language spoken by the Kondh) word for bauxite, is a precious resource necessary for the survival of the forest and its 36 perennial water streams because of its water-retaining characteristics.

In late February, the Kondh held an oath-taking ceremony on top of the hill where they resolved not to allow Vedanta to enter the forest even if it gets the clearance, which they fear is imminent. In such an event, says Lenju, the tribal people will run short of options. "Once they get the final clearance and come here for mining, we will have no option but to fight them tooth and nail," he says. "We have started preparations for the confrontation and that is when the government will declare us Maoists and unleash CRPF [Central Reserve Police Force] troops on us. But we have nothing to lose. We will fight it out and die but will not let go of our forest," he says.

In an exclusive conversation with *Frontline*, Union Minister Jairam Ramesh said the Ministry was not in any hurry to give the clearance. "The team sent by us found that Vedanta has violated the terms and conditions under which the approval was given to them. The project involves forest and non-forest areas. These guys have already started work in the non-forest areas, which is a violation," he said. The Minister admitted that mining would spell doom for the mountain and its people and also expressed surprise at the fact that the Supreme Court overlooked the recommendations of the CEC.

"If they manage to get the clearance, Niyamgiri will be destroyed forever. But there is no hurry and we are exploring all options. The Supreme Court has given its approval, but I have to say it seems strange as it is the only case where the Supreme Court has not accepted the recommendations of the CEC," he said. □