

From New Delhi by Susan B. Maitra

Asia Watch in bed with Naxalites

When the Andhra Pradesh government began to crack down on the terrorists, a hue and cry went up about "human rights violations."

After putting up its defense on behalf of the Khalistani and Kashmiri secessionists in India, the Washington-based human rights group Asia Watch has made its pitch for the Naxalites—an organization with avowed ties to the Shining Path of Peru—in a recently published 49-page report on "Police Killings and Rural Violence in Andhra Pradesh." The report said that while the radical militants (Asia Watch's designation for terrorists) pose a "serious security threat," the police and federal forces "collude with politically influential landowners to assault and murder peasants and tribal villagers in the name of fighting terrorism."

The latest Asia Watch report is the fourth of its kind on India published during the last 18 months. The first was on "Indian Prison Conditions" (April 1991); the second was "Kashmir under Siege" (May 1991); and the third was "Punjab in Crisis" (August 1991).

As if the report were not enough, Asia Watch Research Director Patricia Gossman told an Indian reporter that police encounters represent the worst abuses of the security forces. She complained that "senior police officers who kill Naxalites receive promotions and cash incentives." Alleging that human rights activists are more at risk in the state of Andhra Pradesh than anywhere else in India, the report recommended that Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, who is from Andhra Pradesh, pressure its chief minister "to end the policy of impunity" and "punish those who engage in human rights abuse."

It is indeed surprising that Asia Watch, a foreign-based group, could have the temerity to urge India's prime minister to remove a duly elected chief minister. Perhaps there are reasons for such rashness. Almost a decade ago, the news agency United News of India reported that police had seized documents showing that "the Naxalite movement is being financed by sources in the U.K., Canada, and the U.S.A." Although the "secret documents" were not made available to the public, it has since been established that the Revolutionary Communist Party in the United States had sent a delegation to India and had subsequently heaped praise on the Naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh.

The other possible reason why Gossman is so enraged about "ruthless suppression" of the Naxalites may lie in the fact that Sharad Pawar, then chief minister of Maharashtra and now India's defense minister, had told the state assembly in 1988 that the Naxalites were armed and trained by the Khalistani separatists of Punjab. It is only fitting and proper that Asia Watch, which had earlier pitched for the Khalistani terrorists, is now upset over use of force against the Naxalite terrorists.

Asia Watch is a bit careful, though, to cover its tracks. The report has duly condemned the "radical militants" for "grave violations including assassinations and summary executions." However, this hardly covered up the essence of the report: to pressure Delhi to stop actions against the Naxalites.

Beside the obvious slant, the re-

port also "fails to mention" that under the pretext of annihilating "class enemies," hundreds have been killed by the Naxalites, and many more have lost their arms for being suspected police informers.

The difficulty that Asia Watch faces now is that the present Congress Party government, after years of a lax policy toward the Naxalites, has decided to take the bull by the horns. Throughout the 1980s, when the state government was under the rule of the corrupt Telegu Desam party, led by N.T. Rama Rao, the Naxalites were allowed to grow as a counter to the controversial Congress Party. During this period, Naxalites procured sophisticated weapons, got trained by fellow terrorists from Punjab, and enhanced their killing power.

On May 21, 1992, the Andhra Pradesh government declared that the main Naxalite gang, People's War Group (PWG), along with a few other groups, is banned, and the government obtained the right to search any premises without a warrant. The decree also tightened bail restrictions on some offenses, and allowed bail to be denied for others.

However, it is too early to say that these policies have met with success. Recently, the Naxalites went on a killing binge. They killed the brother and two family members of the minister of municipal affairs in Andhra Pradesh, and 17 policemen, including seven paramilitary personnel. The incident has angered the police, hardening the attitude within the force. And senior Congress Party members have received death threats from Naxalite terrorists whom Asia Watch is openly defending.

Meanwhile, the Indian press has given highly favorable coverage to the actions taken by Peru's President Alberto Fujimori against the narco-terrorist Shining Path.