

## 'NO' to Peace Initiative

*[Following is a slightly shortened version of a press statement issued by NAPM and Delhi Solidarity Group on 15 December, 2009 at Press Club, New Delhi]*

Chattisgarh State Government and the Salwa Judum prevented Himanshu Kumar, Sandeep Pandey and others from taking out padyatra on December 25, 2009 in Dantewada with the objective of restoring peace and normalcy in an area suffering from state repression, militarization and violence. Even though the DGP, Mr Vishwaranjan has claimed in a newspaper report that the padyatra started under the police protection, it was evident from police and SPOs action that all efforts were made by the state Government to stop the padyatra from taking place. Earlier on December 24, 2009, 39 women activists from all over the country who tried unsuccessfully to reach Dantewada from Raipur, on the way back were mobbed by Salwa Judum in Kanker who forced them to come out of the bus. The women activists were harassed before being allowed to return to Raipur.

All of this has been happening even when Home Minister P Chidambaram, expressed his intentions of travelling to Dantewada on 7th January, 2010 to attend a public hearing to be organised by Vanvasi Chetna Ashram and other groups where tribal residents of this region will share their experiences of the Salwa Judum, Operation Green Hunt and their struggle for justice. It is obvious that the Government of Chattisgarh is all out to sabotage this democratic process through intimidation as well as direct attack and stop the large number of adivasis from ventilating their grievances.

In the changed circumstances, Himanshu Kumar and others from Dantewada declared that there would begin a Satyagraha against the unjustifiable State violence, asserting their right to support the adivasis in their struggle for peace and justice. They also have requested the Home Minister to immediately make an official announcement of his visit and not to withdraw in any situation of deliberate sabotage by the state government of Chattisgarh.

Speaking at a press conference Retd. Justice Rajinder Sachar, People's Union for Civil Liberties said, "It is shameful that citizens of this country are being prevented from travelling to Dantewada by the Chattisgarh administration and a peaceful padyatra is stopped in close collaboration with Salwa Judum, which has been condemned from various quarters for the atrocities it has committed on the tribals of the regions. The denial of civil liberties to citizens in the Dantewada today is a cause of grave concern to everybody." Uppermost in everybody's mind today is, however, protecting the rights of the adivasis who are facing all kinds of deprivation because, the State, notwithstanding its public profession, is not fulfilling its duty to ensure that development is planned within the framework of justice and equity.

Medha Patkar, National Alliance of People's Movements, condemned the attempts of the State government to stifle any resistance and labelling of false charges (including of murder) against Kopa Kunjam, the adivasi activist with Vanvasi Chetna Ashram and Alban Topo, an adivasi and human rights lawyer

who were beaten up at the police station ironically on December 10, Human Rights Day. "This can't, however, act as a deterrent to the committed and peaceful movements", she affirmed. In a letter to Home Minister P Chidambaram she urged to take urgent note of the potential threat from the Salwa Judum and the SPOs who took out a rally on December 10th condemning Himanshu Kumar and openly raising life-threatening slogans such as, "Himanshu Bhagao Bastar Bachao" and "Himanshu ko Maro". "The Centre can't deny its responsibility to ensure and guarantee not just legal rights, but human justice," she reiterated.

Prashant Bhushan, senior lawyer further added, "the happenings in Chattisgarh is a well thought out and planned strategy of the State to enforce a complete blackout of tribal areas when government is planning an unprecedented attack on the tribals in the name of war against Naxals. Not only the legislature and the Executive, but the Judiciary also should have intervened with much more sensitivity and clarity by now, but unfortunately, all action towards establishing justice and democracy is only left to the people's movements. He appealed to the sensitive intellectuals to support the move-ments, in every possible way".

Mamata Kujur, Adivasi Mahila Mahasangh, Chattisgarh narrated the atmosphere of distrust and fear prevailing in the State, since many young tribals are being branded today as naxals by the state. She added, "it is an attempt at finishing off the democratic voices in the region since they are posing the biggest opposition to the state's and private corporations' unlawful attempt at exploiting the mineral resources of the region.

Ashish Gupta, People's Union for Democratic Rights, added that, "it's an irony that the democratic processes in the country are under pressure from the state forces itself who are supposed to protect them. The demolition of the Ashram first and then continued harassment of anybody associated with the Vanvashi Chetna Ashram is shameful and unjustifiable. What people are witnessing today in Chattisgarh or Naraynpatna, Orissa where an all women fact finding team was harassed and threatened by the local goons in collusion with the police is completely savage behaviour of the state and unexpected in a democracy."

Abhay Sahu, Posco Pratirodh Sangram Samiti, while condemning the incidents urged the left secular forces and progressive people's movement to put together a joint platform and resist any onslaught on civil and political liberties of the citizens of this country.

It's indeed a grave and grievous situation that is faced by the adivasis, especially in Chattisgarh i.e. one of violence and the other of deprivation, both the vices trampling upon their right to life, livelihood and peace. Their existence itself being threatened the State either failing to intervene with a dialogue with the people's movements, even in an unarmed struggle, or as in Chattisgarh, evicting and killing them in the garb of 'combating Maoism'. All this is apparently an offshoot of the political-economic agenda of grabbing their rich resource base.

The citizens team re-appealed and re-asserted that those who are struggling within the secular democratic and non-violent framework must not be targeted by the State in such trumped up criminal charges or in any other manner as this would only shrink the space for those who are attempting peaceful resolution of conflicts and are for establishment of democracy and justice. It is the duty of the Central and State governments to pro-actively protect such individuals and

organizations from any physical attack or otherwise and immediately release Kopa Kunjam and punish the guilty police officials involved in harassment of the activists. □□□