

NOTE

## Targeting Women

**Partho Sarathi Ray writes :**

The operations of the joint central and state forces in Lalgarh and adjoining areas for the last one year have been marked by horrible atrocities including killings of activists and common people, rapes, indiscriminate beatings and detentions, looting and ransacking of houses and poisoning of sources of drinking water. Women, who have been in the forefront of the adivasi movement in Lalgarh, have been especially targeted and the recent mass rape and torture of women in Sonamukhi village of Jhargram sub-division in West Midnapore is possibly the latest feather to be added to the cap of the West Bengal police and the CRPF. As usual, references in the mainstream press have been limited to a line or two hidden within reports of violence by Maoists or encounters between security forces and Maoists.

The incident happened on 30th June when the joint state police and central paramilitary forces had apparently gone to a village called Grihatakam under Jhargram subdivision to track a Maoist squad. This area had been the site of a recent encounter between the Maoists and paramilitary forces. En route they raided the adjoining Sonamukhi village supposedly in search of Maoists. As usual all the menfolk had fled the village because there were reports of the advancing police/CRPF party. Finding the womenfolk alone in the village, the policemen unleashed horrible atrocities on them. At least six women, Lalita Mahato, Umarani Mahato, Giribala Mahato, Jyotsna Mahato and Anima Mahato, were raped. Many others, including Rinku Mahato, Soma Mahato, Kajal Mahato, Manika Mahato, Niyati Mahato and Chayarani Mahato were beaten black and blue, dragged around by their hair and kicked. Lalita Mahato, who went to depose before the sub-divisional officer of Jhargram on 6th July stated that she had entered her cowshed to tie up her cows (because the CRPF jawans are known to beat up domestic animals without any reason) when the raiding party entered the village. A policeman entered the cowshed and slapped her hard. When she fell down she was dragged into the house and stripped. She broke down after this and could not continue. None of the women dared to lodge a complaint with the police. How could they dare to when the perpetrators were policemen themselves? Lalita had been admitted to a hospital and the doctor had said that he would file a report of rape if she lodged a complaint. But she did not dare to. Only on 6th July, a week after the atrocities, did the women go to lodge a complaint with the SDO of Jhargram, accompanied by local TMC and Congress politicians. The SDO instructed the Super of Jhargram subdivisional hospital to admit six of the women and do a medical test. He has also assured them that he will file a report to the home secretary.

Santosh Rana of the CPI(ML) PCC has written a letter to the Chief Secretary demanding redressal. But it is unlikely that anything is going to happen, as the police has refused to admit that anything happened. The case of the women of Sonamukhi will probably become just another statistic in the ever growing list of victims of Operation Green Hunt, but the result might be that more and more CRPF raiding and road opening parties will come under fire when they approach adivasi villages.□