

LETTERS

NANDIGRAM CARNAGE

The independent People's Tribunal on Nandigram probing the violent events of 14 March 2007 has recommended the setting up of special Human Rights Courts to ensure speedy justice for all cases of human rights violations that have occurred in Nandigram and adjoining areas in their interim report.

The Tribunal, organised by a network of concerned citizens across India, heard depositions from victims, witnesses, social activists, intellectuals, doctors, human rights groups and other concerned organisations. The hearings were held in both Nandigram and Kolkata from 26-28 May and headed by Justice S N Bhargav, former Chief Justice of the Sikkim High Court.

Tribunal members, which included Pravash Joshi (Editorial Advisor, Jansatta), Lalita Ramdas (Social Activist), John Dayal (Member, National Integration Council) and Jyotirmoy Samajder (Psychiatrist), visited the site of police firing and other places in the Nandigram area relevant to understanding the circumstances and nature of the violence.

The Tribunal received over 39 oral and 142 written depositions at the hearings held at primary schools in Gokulnagar and Sonachura and the University Institute Hall in Kolkata. While a final report of its findings is still being prepared the Tribunal has the following observations to make, based on prima facie evidence as well as depositions made before it:

- There is no doubt at all that grave violations of human rights have been committed against the villagers of Nandigram;
- There seems to be a disturbingly large number of reports of sexual violence against women;
- There is an urgent need for a thorough, independent investigation of the events of 14 March 2007, especially with a view to ensuring justice for all those whose rights have been violated;
- There are still a significant number of people in the area who need immediate medical attention for various problems related to the violence;
- From all accounts no steps have been taken by the state machinery to provide compensation for the dead and injured so far.

- The education and normal activities of school going children in both Nandigram and adjoining areas such as Khejuri have been seriously affected due to both past and ongoing disturbances.

Based on these observations the Tribunal would therefore like to make the following, preliminary recommendations:

- Special Human Rights Courts should be set up in West Bengal at the earliest to deal with all cases of human rights violations that have occurred in Nandigram and adjoining areas;
- Stringent punishment needs to be meted out to all public officials and others guilty of violation of human rights or administrative lapses leading to such violations;
- There should be adequate compensation and social rehabilitation provided to families of all those killed or injured in the violence of 14 March 2007, as well as in the period before and after this date.
- Many of those injured were men and women working as wage labour in agriculture and other sectors. They are no longer able to continue working and must also be provided alternate employment;
- There should be special compensation and social rehabilitation provided to all victims of rape or molestation in Nandigram and adjoining areas; Steps should be taken immediately to trace all those who are supposed to have gone ‘missing’ in the aftermath of the violence in Nandigram and adjoining areas;
- Free and competent medical treatment should be provided by the state government for all those physically or mentally affected by the violence; Urgent relief needs to be provided to all those livelihoods have been severely affected by the turmoil since January 2007.
- Immediate steps should be taken to stop ongoing violence in Nandigram and adjoining areas and every effort made, in a sincere manner, to bring peace among all factions involved. The services of non-governmental and civil society organizations should be utilized in the peace process if necessary.
- All necessary precautions need to be taken to prevent the occurrence of such events in future in other parts of West Bengal.

The Tribunal will continue working on a final report of its findings and present them to various concerned agencies for further action.

All India Citizens’ Initiations,
Kolkata

150 YEARS LATER

It has been 150 years since Indian members of the British East India Company's army revolted. This grew into a full-fledged rebellion involving large segments of India's population opposing the British, which was met with unflinching brutality against civilian populations.

A big debate has been raging in the sub-continent, especially in India, if the year-long struggles of the people actually amounted to the "First War of Independence" or these were just the last gasps of a dying and decadent order. It is a futile, intellectually sterile, debate. So also are the many "Orientalist" assertions of the last 150 years that this glorious struggle was only a "Sepoy Mutiny" triggered by irrational religious beliefs around beef or pork fat. At the very least, these discussions and assertions ignore the vital fact that by 1857, "the Honourable East India Company" had not only destroyed the economic base of India and its all-too-powerful and all-too-pervasive mercantilist bourgeoisie that had already emerged, but had also created a comparador class of landlords and intellectuals.

One has to know as to what had been happening to the polity and economy of the subcontinent for at least 350 years before 1857 (the first European settlement on the Indian soil was established in 1498) in order to adequately grasp the significance of those struggles.

It was a War of Independence, par excellence.

Hari Sharma,
Sansad, Canada