

**Date: 4 September 2014**

**Press Release**

**Attack on the democratic processes in Bastar under the guise of counter insurgency is an issue of concern.**

Adv Sudha Bhardwaj, General Secretary of Chhattisgarh People's Union for Civil Liberties, expressed her organisation's deep concern at the recent developments in the Antagarh By-Election for the Legislative Assembly. The withdrawal of nominations of ten out of the twelve candidates and the subsequent events including the mysterious disappearance and reappearance of the Congress candidate Manturam Pawar cannot be called natural, especially since the Congress party had won several seats in the Bastar division only recently. According to a newspaper report, the only candidate remaining in the fray now - Roopdhar Puddo from the Ambedkarite Party of India- in a press conference stated that he was under a lot of pressure, including even directly from the Private Secretary of the Chief Minister Shri OP Gupta, to withdraw his nomination due to which he had to go "underground" till the period for withdrawing nominations lapsed. Today the 10 candidates who had withdrawn their names are reported to have "joined the Bharatiya Janata Party". The holding of free and fair elections is a fundamental and essential requisite of our democratic structure. But it seems that militarization in Bastar is being abused to deal with political opponents.

On 26<sup>th</sup> August in Raipur, the State President of the Congress Party, Mr. Bhupesh Baghel, mentioned in a press conference, that the recent surrender of so-called 'Hardcore Naxalites' - Chetram Sahu and his wife Manjula is false, and the two are ordinary villagers. Manjula works as a cook. Similarly, on 27<sup>th</sup> August, the President of the Adivasi Mahasabha and former MLA from CPI Party, Mr Manish Kunjam informed the Press at Jagdalpur that he had submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister stating that that Manjhiram Kashyap and Sukhdev Nag who have been arrested as accused in the Jeeram Ghati incident are actually post bearers of the CPI. Sukhdev Nag is an elected member of the Darbha Janpad Panchayat and Mangiram is secretary of Tahakwada branch of the CPI. They were summoned to the Tongpal police station on August 25<sup>th</sup>. Although they were sent back on the ground that the Thana Incharge was not present, they were asked to come again in the evening and were arrested on charges of being involved in the Jeeram Attack and the killing of Mahendra Karma. It is pertinent to note that prior to their arrests, the two had been questioned on two occasions by the NIA, which had let them go on finding no evidence against them.

On 27<sup>th</sup> August, Soni Sori, the former electoral candidate of the Aam Admi Party, addressed a press conference in Jagdalpur. She mentioned that a fact finding group of her party had discovered that the claim of the State that 11 Naxalites had been killed in an encounter in Village Ramaram in Chintagufa Block was false and actually the

indiscriminate firing of the forces had resulted in the death of a woman from the village - Adme Vetti, who was buried in the village itself. She also said that the claim of the state regarding the alleged surrender of a naxalite named Gali from the village of Bade Gudra is also false. Gali was an ordinary villager, who despite his supposed surrender, has been put in jail instead of being given the benefits mentioned in the surrender policy. It is pertinent to note that in the past few months the police claims that there have been about 120 surrenders. These surrenders also include a woman with a 3 year old child.

In the last six months, about 13 people's representatives (*Sarpanches/Janpad Sadasyas/Sachivs*) have been arrested in the Kanker District. These arrests included the Congress leader of Antagarh Block, Badri Gawde, who was also spearheading the 'Raoghat Sangharsh Samiti's' protest in the area. The other arrested elected representatives include Ganesh Kunjam, Sarpanch Timnar, Amabeda; Mohan Singh Dhruv, Sarpanch, Bade Pinjori, Amabeda; Baliram Usendi, Sarpanch Siksod, Koyalibeda; Dhannuram Dhruv, Sarpanch Tadoki, Antagarh; Ramkumar Mandavi, Sarpanch Muragaon, Kanker; Mahangu Ram Baghel, Sarpanch, Kavapal, Jagdalpur and the Sarpanches of village Antagarh and Bhaisgaon of Antagarh Block. The local people see these arrests as a measure to suppress opposition to the proposed development projects in the area, notably two Ultra Mega Steel Plants, and the Raoghat Mines.

During the UPA regime, the Chhattisgarh government had filed a petition before the Supreme Court opposing the Polavaram project, wherein it had stated that this project would lead to the submergence of about 16 villages in the Konta region and the loss of approximately 7000 hectares of forest land rich in biodiversity and wildlife. The Chhattisgarh government had alleged that there has not been sufficient research to gauge the true impact of the project, neither have any of the Gram Sabhas in the area been consulted as mandated under the PESA Act. However, now, in the light of the regime change at the Centre, the Chhattisgarh government does not appear to be doing anything to safeguard the rights and interests of its people. Recently, the Adivasi Mahasabha had taken out a long padyatra to register the protest of local people against the Polavaram project in Konta Block.

Finally, the Chhattisgarh People's Union for Civil Liberties gave the information that on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August 2014, the Supreme Court has issued notice to the Chhattisgarh State, seeking its reply to the Special Leave Petition filed by PUCL challenging the constitutionality of the Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act. Justice Rajinder Sachar appeared on behalf of PUCL in the matter.