

Insight Report: India

Naxal insurgency: Diminishing yet sustaining

May 2021



India Travel Security Risk Rating



MEDIUM: India

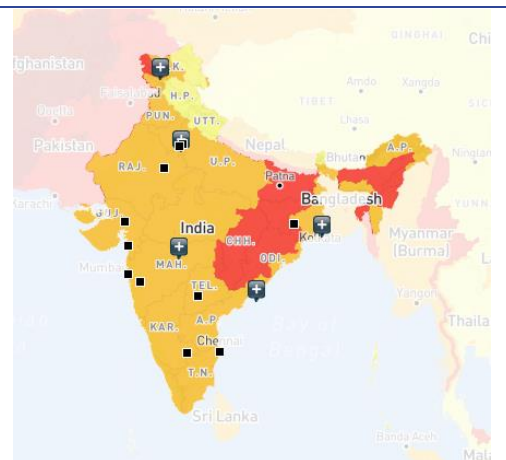


LOW: Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Lakshadweep, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Leh district (Ladakh union territory)



HIGH: Asom (Assam), Manipur, Nagaland, Tripura, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, non-coastal districts of Odisha (Orissa), the eastern areas of Maharashtra, Kashmir division and parts of Jammu division (both Jammu and Kashmir union territory)

Evacuation planning level: **PREPARATORY**



Key judgements

- Violence involving extreme-leftist Naxalite (also known as Maoist) rebels has steadily declined in recent years, along with the insurgents' diminishing geographical presence. However, they remain entrenched in rural and forested areas of 30 districts, officially labelled as 'highly affected' by Naxal activity, in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Odisha and Telangana states.
- An attack by Naxal rebels in April in Chhattisgarh, in which 22 security force personnel were killed, highlighted the continued capability of Naxalites to carry out large strikes in their strongholds. However, the incident does not suggest any increase in the rebels' operational capability or change in tactics or targeting patterns.
- Large attacks will continue to mainly occur between March and June, when the rebels undertake their annual Tactical Counter Offensive Campaign. However, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in rural areas of Maoist strongholds in Chhattisgarh may compromise the rebels' ability to stage large attacks in the coming weeks.
- Sustained security operations and government developmental projects in rebel strongholds will continue to spur attacks. While security force personnel and infrastructure remain the primary targets of rebel attacks, civilian fatalities incurred in this type of violence underline the credible risks posed by Naxal activity.
- Managers with operations in Naxal-affected states should fully brief their workforce on the prevailing threats and necessary mitigation measures. Journey management planning is necessary when travelling through highly affected districts, while the security situation should be regularly reviewed to identify any change in targeting patterns.

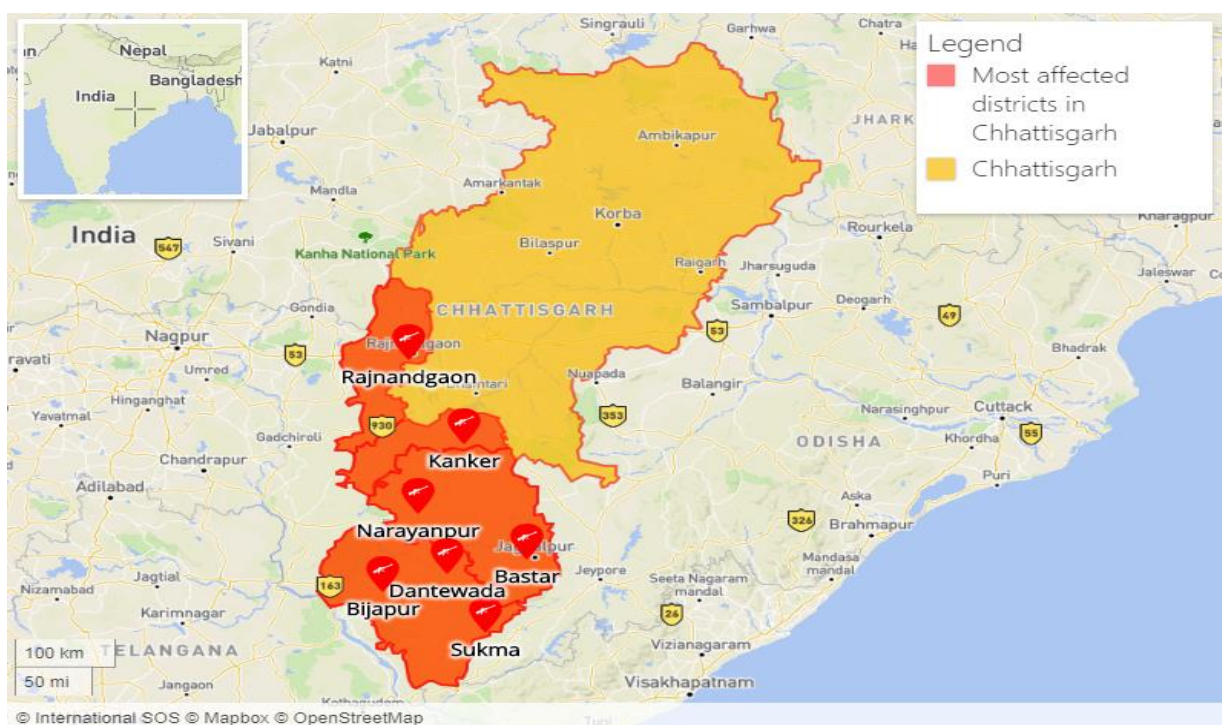
Overview

In the mid-2000s, the Naxal insurgency was active in around 40% of India's territory, dubbed as the 'Red Corridor', which included parts of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha (Orissa). However, the rebels' geographical footprint has reduced considerably. The Ministry of Home Affairs now identifies 90 districts in 11 states that are affected by Naxal activities, as opposed to around 180 in 2010. Of these, 30 districts have been classified as highly affected, with Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand alone accounting for 21 of them.

Violence involving Naxalites has also steadily decreased in recent years, along with the insurgents' diminishing geographical presence (see our previous *Insight Report on Naxal activity, published in October 2020*). However, the 3 April ambush in Bijapur district (Chhattisgarh), in which 22 security force personnel were killed, highlights the continued capability of Naxalites to carry out large attacks. While the security forces remain the primary targets, civilian fatalities frequently incurred in such violence underline the credible risks posed by Naxal activity.

Rebels' major areas of operation and capabilities

The Dandakaranya region – which includes parts of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Telangana – is said to be the stronghold of Naxalites. Of these states, Chhattisgarh is the worst affected and has suffered some of the deadliest Naxal attacks. Related fatalities in recent years have mainly been reported from seven districts in the state: Bastar, Bijapur, Dantewada, Kanker, Narayanpur, Rajnandgaon and Sukma (see map below).



The People's Liberation Guerrilla Army – the armed wing of the Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist) – is estimated to have around 8,000 to 10,000 fighters, with the wider Maoist movement membership ranging from 10,000 to 15,000. Naxalites have links with separatist groups in the north-east

and criminal and Islamist networks in Bangladesh for arms procurement and training. They also possess the knowledge and capability to produce bombs, as well as have weapons manufacturing facilities. The security forces on 4-5 March destroyed a rebels' weapons manufacturing unit near the Chhattisgarh-Maharashtra state border along Gadchiroli district (Maharashtra).

Explosives are often obtained by raiding mining and construction sites, which store such materials for industrial use. In addition, Naxalites have demonstrated the capability to gather intelligence, mainly attributed to networks of local sympathisers/informants or obtained via coercion and financial rewards. This, along with familiarity with local terrain, has aided their ability to carry out large attacks.

Rebel activities and targets

Naxal attacks primarily focus on security force personnel and convoys, politicians and local government officials. They also target government-sponsored infrastructure projects and facilities. Civilians are occasionally targeted for not being aligned with the Naxal ideology (including former rebels), or over suspicion of acting as informants for the security forces. They are also sometimes killed during shoot-outs between the security forces and Naxalites. There have also been instances in the past when villagers and workers have fallen victims to bombs planted by Naxalites to destroy infrastructure under construction.

March-June: a high-risk period

Large attacks targeting the security forces typically occur during the rebels' annual Tactical Counter Offensive Campaign (TCOC) from March to June. It takes place before the start of the monsoon season, when weather and topography in the insurgents' areas of operation make attacks difficult. Thinning foliage during the March-June period in forested areas provides better visibility to carry out operations or attacks. Limited water resources for insurgents during summer months (March-May) also aid in planning counter-insurgency operations, with the security forces targeting locations where water is available.

Large attacks are planned to maximise casualties among security personnel, as highlighted by the 3 April incident. Reports indicated that the security forces went into the forested area after receiving inputs that senior Naxal leader Madvi Hidma was

present there. However, they walked into a trap and were surrounded by around 400 Naxalites. Nearby villages were also empty, underlining the fact that the ambush was well planned. However, the overwhelmingly rural/remote nature of rebel attacks means that they pose incidental risks mainly to those transiting between urban centres. The latter, including district headquarters, are not affected.

Major attacks during the TCOC

3 April 2021: Twenty-two security force personnel were killed and 30 others injured in clashes with Naxalites in the Jagargonda-Jonaguda-Tarrem region of Bijapur.

21 March 2020: Naxalites ambushed a security force convoy in Sukma, killing 17 personnel and injuring 15 others.

1 May 2019: Fifteen police officers and one civilian were killed in a bomb attack in Gadchiroli.

9 April 2019: Five people, including a legislator, were killed in a roadside explosion in Dantewada.

20 May 2018: Seven police officers were killed in an explosion in Dantewada.

13 March 2018: Nine security force personnel were killed in Sukma.

24 April 2017: Twenty-six members of the security forces were killed in an ambush by around 300 Naxalites in Sukma.

11 March 2017: Twelve security force personnel were killed in an ambush in Sukma.

Weakened by COVID-19?

Following the 3 April attack, the security forces launched a major operation in Chhattisgarh. Amid sustained pressure from the security forces, several Naxalites have surrendered in recent weeks in the state. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in rural areas has also been a factor in such surrenders. The police on 11 May said they had seized a letter addressed to a senior Naxal leader, which mentioned the spread of COVID-19 among CPI-Maoist members in Bastar division. On 13 and 20 May, six Naxalites surrendered in Kanker and Dantewada, respectively; five of them tested positive for COVID-19. The spread of COVID-19 in Maoist strongholds may compromise the rebels' ability to stage large attacks in the coming weeks. However, there will likely be an increase in the frequency of small-scale attacks and bandhs (shutdown strikes), as the rebel leadership attempts to motivate cadres and prevent desertions.

A threat to overland travel

Bandhs are usually held in response to specific developments or to mark sensitive anniversaries. Known flashpoints in the coming months will include Naxal martyrs' week (**27 July-3 August**) and Independence Day (**15 August**). Strikes are well observed in rural areas of Naxal-affected districts, but not so much in urban centres. Traders and transport operators suspend operations in such areas because of the fear of attacks. Naxalites block roads and occasionally target rail infrastructure, as well as plant bombs on secondary routes to hamper security operations.

During a bandh on 26 April, rebels damaged tracks near the Lotapahar railway station in West Singhbhum district (Jharkhand), disrupting rail services for several hours. The authorities usually implement pre-emptive measures, such as changing train times to avoid passing through bandh-affected areas at night and imposing speed limits. Trucks travelling along routes transiting through Naxal-affected districts have also been targeted in arson attacks. During the 26 April bandh, Naxalites set alight seven vehicles along National Highway (NH)-30 in the Errabore area of Sukma (*see our sidebar on vulnerable routes*).

Vulnerable routes during bandhs

Bihar

- NH-19 and NH-22 via Aurangabad and Gaya

Chhattisgarh

- NH-30 via Sukma
- State Highway (SH)-5 between Sukma and Dantewada
- Bacheli-Nakulnar and Bacheli roads near Chohnar (Bastar)

Jharkhand

- NH-20 between Ranchi and Khunti
- NH-43 between Ranchi and Jamshedpur
- NH-98 via Palamu

Maharashtra

- NH-63, NH-353C and NH-930 via Gadchiroli towards the Chhattisgarh border

Odisha

- NH-26 via Koraput

Extortion targeting mining, construction projects

In addition, extortion targeting businesses engaged in the extractive sector and development projects, including road construction, is a concern in Naxal-affected areas, which are usually rich in mineral resources. It is a key source of funding for Naxalites. Small- and medium-sized businesses are more vulnerable to extortion demands than large companies. Naxalites usually extort money from local traders

and contractors working on behalf of companies. Refusal to pay can result in vandalism of or damage to company equipment and infrastructure. While physical harm to employees is rare, some splinter groups of the CPI-Maoist in Jharkhand have previously engaged in such acts.

Recommendations to travel risk managers

Managers with operations in Naxal-affected areas should ensure their workforce is fully briefed on the prevailing threats and necessary mitigation measures. Updates on the security situation should be disseminated regularly, highlighting any ongoing or upcoming issues. Managers should ensure they maintain good lines of communication with their workforce and are able to account for them in case of a security incident. They should also ensure that an alternative form of communication is available, in case the primary means experiences difficulties.

Travel outside major cities in Naxal-affected districts of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Maharashtra and Telangana should be conducted with enhanced security and logistical support. Journey management procedures should be implemented for road travel in the highly affected districts. These include travelling only during daylight hours, implementing check-in procedures during travel to specific sites, knowing how to react when encountering roadblocks or vehicle breakdowns, and having agreed escalation times.

Additional precautions need to be exercised during bandhs or on sensitive dates. Any non-essential road travel through remote or rural areas, as well as rail journeys, should be avoided during such periods. Any essential travel should be conducted after reconfirming the status of routes. Swift passage should be given to any security convoys and safe distance should be maintained from such vehicles. Be prepared to adjust plans with minimal warning, as a result of any changes in the security situation.

Organisations operating in Naxal-affected states should regularly review the security situation to detect any changes in targeting patterns and potential exposure to rebel activities to mitigate risks. People should maintain a low profile and avoid disclosing their organisational affiliations. Ensure contingency plans are known to your workforce and that they are kept up-to-date and realistic. They should be regularly tested and tailored to the local risk environment. Organisations with operations in remote areas should ensure that people are familiar with, and observe, local customs. They should also have native language capabilities to help navigate any local complexities and for support during movement.

This Insight Report has been prepared by our South Asia Regional Security Centre, which includes security experts with extensive on-the-ground experience in Naxal-affected areas. For follow-up questions about the assessment or recommendations in this report, please call your nearest Regional Security Centre.

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