

Health crisis amid the Maoist insurgency in India

The ongoing conflict between India's Maoist rebels and the government across states in the east and centre of the country has displaced thousands of people. Refugees living in camps and settlements face a multitude of health problems. Kristin Elisabeth Solberg reports.

In the intense Indian midday heat, a 3-year-old barefoot refugee stumbles towards his father. Madivi Gangar's stomach is bloated, and his thin arms are dotted with the scaly patches of ringworm. With tired eyes he looks up at his father—a skinny man queuing up for basic medicines being handed out by a visiting non governmental organisation (NGO). "We don't have anything to eat. My wife died from starvation last year", Moodivi Ramesh says as he receives a pack of painkillers.

The family is among several hundred thousand caught up in an armed Maoist insurgency in the heart of India. The violent conflict, which analysts say will escalate in the coming years, has already had a devastating effect on the physical and mental health of people in affected areas, which are largely poor and rural. Malaria, diarrhoea, and skin infections flourish in the conflict zone. Clean drinking water is scarce, and malnutrition is the new norm. In areas under complete Maoist control, moreover, public health care is reported to be failing or altogether absent.

India's Maoist rebels, known as the Naxalites, are active in 16 states across eastern and central parts of the sub-continent. The underdeveloped state of Chhattisgarh is the epicentre of the insurgency. Here, villagers like Moodivi Ramesh and his six children are caught in the middle of the increasingly violent conflict between the rebels and a government-backed anti-Naxal civil militia known as the Salva Judum.

Local NGOs estimate that more than 100 000 villagers have fled because of the violence in Chhattisgarh. Some, like Moodivi Ramesh's family, live in settlements in the dense forest in the neighbouring states of Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. Others live in the state-run, Salva Judum-

controlled camps which dot southern Chhattisgarh.

The living conditions in both the camps and the settlements are precarious. "The refugees have lost everything because of the conflict", says Shaik Haneef, who hands out

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painkillers to refugees through his NGO Sitara. "They have no proper clothing, no water, little food. That makes them vulnerable to many health problems, including malaria", he adds.

Malaria is a major problem among the refugees, explains Haneef. Malaria was prevalent in the dense forests of Chhattisgarh before the conflict intensified in 2005. But, Haneef says, the problem is much more acute now, with a large number of people displaced in areas which are difficult to access.

Other NGO workers in the conflict zone notice the same trend. Himash Kumar, director of the Chhattisgarh

NGO, Vanwasi Chetna Ashram, says that malaria is definitely increasing in the state. "Malaria has always been a problem in the area", he says, "but now, when proper medicines are no longer supplied to the people, the situation has worsened".

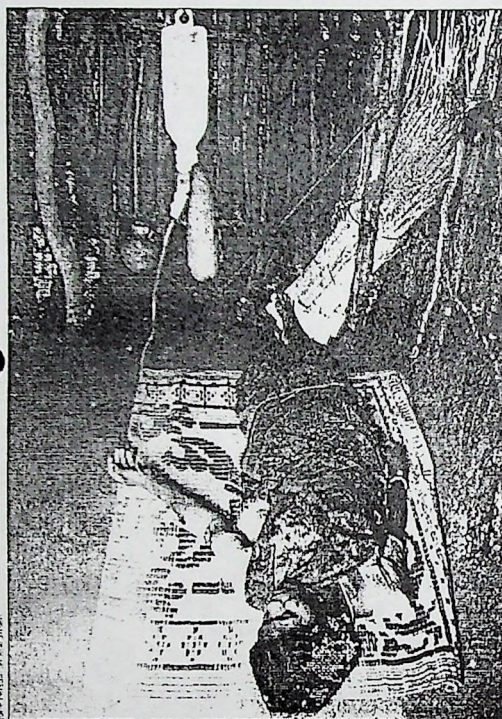
The violence and displacement have also made access to clean drinking water difficult, adds Kumar. Some villages and settlements have consequently seen epidemic outbreaks of scabies. "The villagers don't have clean drinking water, and are not provided sufficient medicines when they are affected with scabies", Kumar says.

Even though malaria and a lack of clean drinking water pose serious health challenges, malnutrition is perhaps the single largest health problem in the conflict zone. In the settlement where Moodivi Ramesh and his family live, no child can muster the energy to play or run. One girl, aged 3 years, weighs only 20 lbs. A boy, aged 5 years, weighs as little as 29 lbs.

Devamma Madakam, a mother of five, says she finds it impossible to feed her children in the settlement. "We have shelter, but no food. We are



Moodivi Ramesh and his son, Madivi Gangar, are given basic medicines from NGO Sitara



Malaria is a major problem among refugees in settlements and camps

starving", she says, adding that the family is sometimes forced to cook and eat forest roots to feed their hunger.

Refugees living in the state-run camps face similar challenges. According to a recent UNICEF assessment in Chhattisgarh's largest camp, 80% of the children under the age of 5 years were malnourished. Malnutrition is a contributing factor in more than 50% of deaths in the age group under 5 years, a figure which Praven Khobragade, health officer for UNICEF in Chhattisgarh, says is a "big concern". With malnutrition come other health problems too, especially in children, he adds. "They suffer from vitamin A deficiencies, and are at increased risk of diarrhoea and all sorts of infections, including pneumonia, malaria, and skin diseases."

The overcrowded camps—the largest of which houses more than 17,000

people within a few square kilometres—pose another serious health threat, adds UNICEF colleague Akhilesh Gaupam, a water and sanitation officer. "One of the major public-health issues here is overcrowding. Any kind of infectious disease will spread fast and reach many. No major epidemic has happened yet, but overall the risk is high, due to the conflict."

In addition to the estimated 100,000 refugees living in camps and settlements, several hundred thousand people also live—voluntarily or involuntarily—in Maoist-controlled areas in Chhattisgarh and other Indian states which are affected by the insurgency. Access to these areas is nearly impossible, and little is known about the humanitarian situation on the ground. Public health care, however, is reported to be scarce or non-existent. "We don't know much about the situation in the Naxal-controlled areas", says Khobragade, "but it's reported that the public health care is in a shambles".

NGOs attempting to fill the health-care vacuum in the Maoist-controlled areas report that they are denied access by Indian authorities, who quote security concerns. "We have come across many villagers who say they are dying from lack of medicines", says Kumar of Vanwasi Chetna Ashram. "We're talking about diseases like diarrhoea, dysentery, and malaria. Simple medicines can save their lives, but even our NGO workers are not allowed to go into the area."

But the health effects of India's Maoist insurgency are not only physical. For the rest of his life, 50-year-old Devaiah Madakam will be haunted by the memory of what happened 2 years ago, when a mob he alleges belonged to Chhattisgarh's Salva Judum militia attacked his village. Hiding in the forest, the tribal man watched the mob cut off his brother's hands, legs and head with large knives. "I cried all the way back to my village", Madakam says, sitting outside his hut in a refugee settlement in Andhra Pradesh. Back in his village, Madakam says, he found his hut burned to the ground. The

bodies of nine more villagers were left scattered around the village.

Experiences like this inevitably have a devastating effect on mental health, says Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia researcher for Human Rights Watch. On a recent visit to the conflict zone in Chhattisgarh, Ganguly met several traumatised victims. "Children described landmines erupting in front of them. There are also many orphaned children, who have lost both their parents and found their bodies discarded in the forest", she says, adding that the state is "completely unequipped" to handle this trauma. "Health care in this area is skeleton to begin with, and there's no availability of any skilled counselling", she says.

It seems unlikely that the victims will be given a chance to recover from their trauma any time soon. Political and security analysts generally agree that the Maoist insurgency is gaining momentum. They warn that violence will increase in the next few years, as the rebels spread to new areas and tighten their hold of existing ones. There are already signs that they are right. So far, 2008 has been an especially bloody year, with almost constant fighting between rebels and security personnel.

A continuation and escalation of the violence will have serious consequences for the rural poor in the conflict zone. "For one, it will be mentally very exhausting", says Khobragade of UNICEF. "Secondly, the delivery of government health services in these areas will be increasingly challenging", he adds. The death toll, which over the last 5 years totals more than 2500, is also likely to rise.

Moodivi Ramesh's wife, who died from starvation last year, is not counted as part of these statistics. Her six children are now fighting for their own survival. 3-year-old Madivi, with his empty, bloated stomach, looks up at his father again, his feverish eyes begging for help. "I'm crying inside", his father says.

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