

## **Improving Internal Security Will Help Economic Recovery**

North Block is virtually deluged by the flood of suggestions for economic reforms from a hyper active media and experts. This reveals that there is still a lot left to be done and the government will have to seriously prioritize its agenda of reforms. Let me instead focus on internal security issues because a peaceful and secure environment is a necessary condition for sustained and equitable growth.

It is important to recognize that an environment in which investors and entrepreneurs fear for the life and safety of their family and face constant threats from mafia don strongly discourages private enterprise. Foreign and domestic investors must be put off by the knowledge that nearly 160 districts are affected by Naxalism or left wing extremism and others by ethnic or religious fundamentalism. For various reasons, law and order being on the concurrent list being one of them, the internal security situation in the country has been steadily deteriorating. It is ironical that the provision of private security guards and systems is one of the fastest growing industry. This progressive privatization of the law and order should be completely unacceptable in a civilized society. The notion that the Indian economy can thrive despite the government should be dismissed as that much nonsense.

We can distinguish between the general law and order situation and the expansion of violent extremist movements whose avowed objective is either to overthrow the constitutionally established state or inflict unacceptable loss of life and property on particular groups of Indian citizens. Preventing a further deterioration in the law and order conditions, requires that an urgent attempt is made to achieve a common understanding across all chief ministers for setting out the minimally acceptable standards for policing and security outcomes. The Union Home Minister, who is vastly experienced and started his ministerial career as in charge of internal security in the mid eighties, can use the Inter State Council for moving towards a consensus on this amongst chief ministers and also to push forward the agenda of police reforms. We all perhaps know that the most effective security agent is a well trained, honest and satisfied beat constable who is not alienated from the community. On the other hand, a situation where nearly 80% of those surveyed opted to settle their problem without informing the police is full of security risks and vulnerability. Police reforms cannot possibly wait any longer and the initiative has to come from the Center.

Better inter-state coordination and exchange of experience and information on successful practices and standards will go a considerable way towards achieving some minimal standards of law and order all across the country. For starters, a much large number of national commercial transport permits should be issued. This will minimize the routine harassment and extortion that happens when commercial vehicles cross state borders. This also poses a security threat as border posts are more interested in making

money rather than carry out the necessary security checks. This must also surely be inimical to promotion of trade, commerce and tourism.

Left wing extremism which flared up during the election period seems to be steadily getting stronger. Hopefully, this was simply because of the police being stretched thinly due to electoral duty. But it is dangerous to see LWE simply as a law and order problem. There are clearly deep seated reasons for this phenomenon to have now festered for more than 40 years. It is time to examine if the spread and deepening of Naxalism in specific regions is closely correlated with the absence of statutorily mandated land reforms and the perpetuation of feudal exploitation. Similarly, the flouting of well established forest laws could well be the reason for the movement taking roots in the tribal areas of Chota Nagpur at the tri-junction of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. These fundamental issues should now be addressed even if that implies taking on the regional vested interests, as conniving further with them will soon precipitate a national emergency.

It will also be useful to categorize the LWE affected districts depending upon on the level of Naxal control over administrative and revenue machinery, level of violence and popular sympathy. This will help the adoption of more nuanced and discriminating approach rather than using a one type fit all strategy as at present. We will find, as suggested by one of the highest ranking think tanks in the country, that in severely affected districts there is no other way but to crush the Naxal activity by using overwhelming state violence. But such districts are no more than two dozen of the total. In other districts police activity and state violence should take a back seat. The important activity here would be to improve governance and thereby the delivery of public services like education, health and protection of fundamental rights of free speech and property. In these districts it would be crucial also to launch counter propaganda that weans away the youth from the futile and costly path of violence. The work of improving governance and counter propaganda in these districts, which can be described as areas of rising sympathy for Naxals, should be monitored by a Civilian Committee that includes not only the district administration but also representatives of the civil society. These Committees will also oversee all police operations in these districts and hear complaints against perceived wrong police action. It is crucial to win back the trust and confidence of the people in these mildly affected districts. This can be achieved only and only by ensuring that all actions against the extremists are scrupulously legal, ethical and transparent and are seen as such by the general population. This combined with land reforms where necessary and qualitatively improved governance will wean away potential supporters. Even in the worst affected districts, where the Indian state must necessarily achieve the monopoly of violence, the action can be combined with a compassionate program of rehabilitation and rejuvenation the misguided youth, many of whom are idealists and can be brought back to the mainstream.