

IMPROVE TECHNOLOGY TO DETECT IEDS

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The road in Dantewada district where a blast, caused by an IED, took place on April 26 . Ten jawans and their driver were killed in the attack, which the police said was carried out by the Maoists. | Photo Credit: AFP

Ten jawans and a civilian driver, who were returning in a van following an anti-Maoist operation, were killed in a blast caused by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in Chhattisgarh's Dantewada on April 26. The IED was planted beneath a metalled road. The was so forceful, it created a huge crater on the road.

Though this attack, which according to the State police had been carried out by the proscribed Communist Party of India (Maoist), is under investigation, the larger issues of the use of IEDs and of tackling such devices must be seriously addressed at different levels — the government, industry, the Maoists, and the security forces — despite the government's claim that the base of the Maoists has shrunk and violence has decreased.

IEDs are among the most potent tools deployed by the Maoists. Even a small formation of the Maoists can cause huge damage to the security forces by using an IED. Therefore, the recent theft of about 7,000 detonators by suspected Maoists from West Singhbhum, Jharkhand, is alarming.

The technical equipment used by the security forces to detect IEDs has its limitations. If the quantity of metal in the IED is low or the IED is planted deep under the road, mine detectors may fail to find it. Though hundreds of IEDs are detected and diffused every year, the search party could always miss a few due to technical reasons. Ground-penetrating radar, which can detect recent disturbances in the soil subsurface, has also not proved successful because it is susceptible to generating false alarms. As not much research and development has been undertaken in this field, the Central government and industry must join hands to improve technology to detect IEDs. Also, the details printed on boxes containing detonators are not sufficient to trace the source of the detonators and punish the guilty. The Central government must, therefore, amend rules and make the manufacturers accountable for unique identification of detonators.

The disrespect of the Maoists even for slain jawans is no longer surreptitious. In January 2013, during the autopsy of a jawan, an IED was found implanted as a booby trap inside the abdomen, in Latehar. India is a signatory to the Geneva and Hague Conventions which regulate the means employed during warfare, so that casualties are checked. The Maoists deliberately and grossly

violate international humanitarian laws — the use of landmines is banned internationally as they are non-discriminatory, lack precision and cause unnecessary or excessive suffering.

It is well known that in addition to the security forces, many civilians, including children, and animals have also been victims of IED attacks. In the April 26 incident, the body parts of the 10 jawans and the driver were found strewn everywhere, making it difficult to collect them and hand them over to the grieving families in a respectable manner. India must raise the issue of the use of IEDs by the Maoists at appropriate international platforms so that the Maoists are forced to respect international humanitarian laws and stop using these devices. This may be taken up despite the fact that the armed struggle of the Maoists does not technically fall under the ambit of 'internal armed conflict,' which the Maoist sometimes claim.

The latest reports indicate that the current focus of the Maoists is to intensify the use of booby traps, snipers (with telescope) and remote IEDs. Previously, before elections, the Maoists would not only plant numerous IEDs, but also make thousands of 'spike holes' in jungle areas to inflict fatal injuries on jawans. The technical department of the Maoists seems to have gradually developed technology to remotely blast the IEDs. The use of technology such as unmanned aerial vehicles and drones may be useful to check suspicious movement, but the security forces need to improve their tactics too.

Knowing that the Maoists have also blasted mine protected vehicles in the past, the use of vehicles should be permitted only after securing the road from ambushes and IEDs. A visual search must be carried out cautiously or deep enough, up to about 100-150 metres on both sides of the road, to check the presence of suspicious elements or wire ends. Every effort needs to be made to detect, diffuse or avoid these brutal devices.

R.K. Vij is former Director General of Police of Chhattisgarh. Views are personal

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