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## **Integrated Action Plan for 25 more Maoist-affected districts**

Smita Gupta

*To be initially implemented in districts with “incipient” Maoist activity*

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*“There should have been consultations with panchayat representatives too”*

*“Governance deficit” must be bridged before the “development deficit” is addressed*

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New Delhi: After intense debates among its own members and consultations with the States, the Planning Commission has decided to increase the number of districts to be addressed by the Integrated Action Plan (IAP) for Left Wing Extremism (LWE) affected areas from 35 to 60.

Commission sources stressed that the IAP will be initially implemented in those districts where there is “incipient” Maoist activity rather than those where an “armed conflict” is currently on. Also part of the rationale for increasing the number is that that the deeply forested tribal-dominated districts — contiguous to those which are worst affected and are in what is described as the Red Corridor — may be dealt with through a development initiative before they too are dominated by the Maoists.

However, the IAP will be ready to roll out only a year to a year and a half after it is cleared by the Union Cabinet as, these sources said, the “governance deficit” must be bridged before the “development deficit” is addressed.

“The sense of alienation among the people has arisen due to a breakdown of government services. Till that is restored through a proper implementation of the Public Distribution System (PDS), the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), provided supply of clean drinking water, and comply with the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and the Panchayat Raj (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, we will just be pouring money into the same leaking pipes,” Commission sources said. Once the governance deficit is addressed, “money won't be a constraint,” they added.

This assumes significance given that the battle in the Commission has been between Member Secretary Sudha Pillai, who has been arguing against increasing the number of districts for IAP implementation, saying it would mean less money for each district, and those members like Mihir Shah, who say that till it is demonstrated that government services are actually reaching those they are intended for, it makes little sense to hand out more money. Government sources added that another defect with the first draft was that it was based on discussions only with government officials from affected States:

“Developmental funds are routed through the panchayats, so there should also have been consultations with panchayat representatives,” these sources said.

The IAP's first draft, discussed on July 5, was dismissed by some Commission members as “routine,” forcing Ms. Pillai, sources said, to incorporate their views. Now the reformulated IAP, which has been drawn up by Mr. Shah, is ready for consideration by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO).

Commission sources added that at the initiative of the PMO, the Forest Rights Act (FRA) Rules were being made more user-friendly so that tribals, particularly those categorised as Particularly Vulnerable Tribals (PVTs), have less problems actually getting land rights. In early July, at a meeting attended by the Secretaries of the Planning Commission, and the Ministries of Home, Tribal Affairs, Panchayati Raj; Principal Secretary in the PMO; and Secretary Coordination in the Cabinet Secretariat, it was decided that the FRA rules should be amended.

The issues that were discussed at that meeting, given the high rate of rejection, were regarding whether the government should consider relaxing standards, especially for the PVTs. For instance, it was felt that the rules, regarding proof of ownership, should be simplified so that an Elders Statement would suffice as most tribals — PVTs in particular — did not possess passports, driving licences, election or PAN cards — the sort of evidentiary support listed in the FRA rules.

Clearly, the IAP will have to be creatively implemented if it is to help contain and tackle Left Wing Extremism.

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