

Controversy breaks out over Chattisgarh anti-Naxal encounter

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A controversy has erupted over the killing of 19 persons in anti-Maoist operations by security forces in Chattisgarh last week amid questions whether the victims were all Naxals with Chief Minister Raman Singh today saying the rebels were using humans as "shields".

Singh and the CRPF defended the encounter while social activist Swami Agnivesh condemned the incident, claiming innocent tribals lost their lives in a "cold-blooded murder." The incident was the most brutal since independence, Agnivesh said.

CPI(M) demanded a time-bound judicial inquiry into last week's killing by CRPF and state police of 19 people, including a woman and two children, alleging they were either brutally axed to death or killed in "indiscriminate firing".

With his government coming under attack from the opposition Congress over the incident, Singh said if any innocent person was killed or injured, then the Naxals must be held responsible for it as they often use innocent villagers as back-up for themselves during such gunfight and use them as "human shields".

Singh said the Congress should not politicise the matter.

The Congress alleged that the incident was a "completely fake encounter" and that the victims "innocent Adivasis."

At least 19 suspected Naxals were killed in a fierce gunfight in the dense jungles of Dantewada during the night-long encounter on June 27-28 in a joint operation by over 300 CRPF and state police personnel in three directions.

Rejecting allegations that innocent villagers were killed, Union Home Secretary RK Singh said six CRPF personnel were also injured in the encounter. He also pointed out that one woman was killed in the encounter and that Naxal outfits had women cadres.

Home Minister P Chidambaram, while interacting with the media in the national capital last week, had identified three important naxals leaders-- Somulu, Nagesh and Mahesh-- who were killed in the gunbattle.

The CRPF claimed its men had retaliated to firing from the rebels.

"We never resorted to the firing. It was provoked from the other side. We had to protect ourselves after so many were injured in open fire...Twice our people retreated on seeing women and children in the front," CRPF DG Vijay Kumar said.