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NEW DELHI, 2 JULY: The controversy over the killings of 20 people in an anti-Maoist operation by Central and state security forces in Bijapur district of Chhattisgarh on 28 June night has snowballed with a number of political parties, including the Chhattisgarh Congress, and social activists questioning the operation and alleging that the people who were gunned down were not Maoists but "tribal villagers".

The CRPF and state police personnel had carried out this operation which they had claimed to be their "biggest encounter" with Maoists in the forests of the Bastar region in Chhattisgarh. Although the Centre, the CRPF and the Chhattisgarh chief minister have continued to defend this counter-Maoists operation, even the Opposition Congress in Chhattisgarh is alleging that the episode was a "fake encounter" and that the victims were "innocent tribals", including boys, school students and a girl.

The CPI-M, the CPI and the CPI-ML have demanded a judicial inquiry to ascertain the truth in the incident. A group of activists, led by Justice Rajinder Sachar and Swami Agnivesh, has also demanded a judicial inquiry into the encounter as they said they did not have faith in the CBI or a magisterial inquiry. Their views were echoed by other activists like Mr B D Sharma and Mr Himanshu Kumar. Swami Agnivesh called the killings "cold-blooded murders" of tribals.

Defending the operation, the BJP leader and Chhattisgarh chief minister, Dr Raman Singh, today accused Maoists of using villagers as their "human shields". He said if any innocent person was killed or injured, then Maoists must be held responsible as, he charged, they often use villagers as shields for themselves during such encounters with security forces.

Rejecting allegations that innocent villagers were killed, the Union home secretary, Mr R K Singh, said six CRPF personnel were also injured in the encounter. He also pointed out that one woman was killed in the incident and that Maoist outfits had women cadres. The Union home minister Mr P Chidambaram had on 29 June praised the security forces involved in the Bijapur operation, identifying three Maoist leaders - Somulu, Nagesh and Mahesh - as among those killed in the gunbattle. The CRPF defended its action, wondering if only killing of security forces should be the norm in their anti-Maoists operations.

The CRPF director-general, Mr K Vijay Kumar, said his force, deep inside the jungles of Silger in Bijapur district, drew the first fire in the night and his men retaliated according to the laid-down standard operating procedure (SOP). "You cannot lay the entire blame on the CRPF or the state police. We have always shown extreme restraint and this was a bonafide action." Mr Kumar claimed: "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.... In the transgression who got injured and how is the matter of forensics and investigation."

A 12-member fact-finding committee constituted by the Chhattisgarh Congress, which went to the affected villages, has reportedly held that the encounter was "fake" and demanded a CBI probe into the incident. There seems to be a remarkable degree of unease and concern within a section of the All India Congress Committee (AICC) over this incident. "Tribals should not become victims of the crossfire between security forces and Maoists. They must be protected at all costs," said the AICC general secretary in charge of Chhattisgarh affairs, Mr B K Hariprasad. Asked about the sharp divergence in Mr Chidambaram's position and the Chhattisgarh Congress's stand, Mr Hariprasad said: "The Union home minister was making his

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Switzerland	57.5
EU	69.1
United Kingdom	86.1
Hong Kong	7.07
Japan	0.687
United States	54.8

3 Jul 12

Weather

City	Max	Min
Bhubaneswar	34°C	27°C
Chennai	38°C	27°C
Ranchi	32°C	23°C
New Delhi	46°C	33°C
Patna	37°C	28°C
Hyderabad	32°C	23°C
Bangalore	30°C	21°C
Mumbai	30°C	26°C
Kolkata	33°C	27°C
Siliguri	31°C	25°C

statement on the basis of a report from the Chhattisgarh government." Mr Hariprasad admitted that local Congress leaders of Chhattisgarh questioned the Bijapur security operation and held that villagers were also killed along with Maoists.

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Page-One

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