

INTERVIEW OF THE WEEK

Dr K Balagopal

'The AP police can kidnap, kill, rape or maim anybody, anywhere, any time'

The Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) and its general secretary, Dr K Balagopal, once again hit the national news following his kidnapping by the self-styled "Praja Bandhu" activists last fortnight. The "Praja Bandhu" demanded the release of two police constables kidnaped by the CPI-ML (People's War Group). The incident left no one in doubt that the "Praja Bandhu" kidnapers were none other than Andhra Pradesh policemen. Indeed, Dr Balagopal levelled precisely this charge after his release on August 31. The charge was duly denied by chief minister NT Rama Rao and the AP director general of police.

Police intimidation is nothing new for civil liberties activists in AP, and particularly for Dr Balagopal (37). Being the APCLC general secretary for the past six years, he has been arrested three times so far and two criminal cases are still pending against him. A noted mathematician, Dr Balagopal took his PhD from the Regional Engineering College, Warangal, and taught in Kakathiya University before resigning from his academic job to plunge into full-time civil liberties work. In this interview to MUKUNDAN C. MENON, conducted in Hyderabad on Wednesday, Dr Balagopal narrates the kidnap episode and responds to NTR's invitation to the APCLC to come for discussions. Excerpts:

How will you assess the present situation marked by violence by both police and the naxalites?

During the past two decades of the naxalite movement in Andhra Pradesh, except for the past 2-3 years, the violence was entirely one-sided on the part of the state. The amount and range of violence that the state, perpetrated, both under Congress(I) and Telugu Desam governments, were phenomenal.

The tally of encounter deaths during the past two decades is 650. Hundreds of villages were burnt, houses were destroyed, fields damaged, women raped and household utensils broken. Thousands were arrested and thrown in jails to spoil their lives. And, throughout these two decades of one-sided state violence, nobody spoke against it except the civil liberties bodies. Each and every attempt of the naxalites to create a mass democratic movement was hit at the roots and destroyed. It was under this background that one naxalite group, the CPI-ML (PWG), decided to hit back. During the past 2-3 years, as their tactical line for this purpose, they acquired sophisticated weapons to match those of the state. This may or may not be politically correct, and may or may not be tactically feasible, but it has this indisputable background of two long decades of one-sided state violence. Look at the state's behaviour even now. Having behaved lawlessly for two decades, and having drawn upon itself the consequences of its lawlessness, it has become more and more lawless in its retaliation. So, when PWG cadres started killing policemen, the policemen started killing civil liberties leaders like Ramanadham and Laxma Reddy.

What is your assessment of the police special task force (STF) which, according to you, was behind your kidnapping?

The creation of STF as an underground police force is a new phenomenon and it is really scaring. I say this not because of my safety and my experience. The STF was given sophisticated weapons from public funds, enormous funds without auditing, and was empowered to use all regular police facilities, like police station, lock-ups, etc. All this state infrastructure is provided to them without any accountability and with absolute immunity from prosecution. They can do anything — kidnap, kill, rape or maim anybody, anywhere, any time. This is the most dangerous trend to emerge from the recent incident of kidnapping.

Why had you gone to the Khammam forest belt from where you were kidnapped?

This is where the largest forest area in the state is situated. From 1969 onwards, the CPI-ML groups have armed squads working there to organise both tribals and non-tribals. For the past two years, in the forest villages of five

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panchayat mandals, namely, Palwancha, Manugur, Aswapuram, Bayyaram and Pinapika, police repression has been going on endlessly.

This situation is symptomatic of what has been happening in AP during the past two years. Nobody talks about this violence in Khammam now. But, if the people retaliate, everybody starts talking about naxal violence. So, an APCLC fact-finding team was constituted to investigate this ongoing state violence in the Khammam forest belt and I was heading this committee. Our committee visited these areas on August 26-27, and submitted a memorandum to the Khammam district collector on August 28. The endless state violence in these tribal villages is taking place at a time when the entire country is so exercised over the bill on Panchyati Raj and local body institutions. Both Rajiv Gandhi and NTR are talking about decentralisation of power and giving more authority to the people in the villages. What is important is, a state which systematically abdicates its constitutional obligation, especially its obligation to behave lawfully, such a state drives the people to take law into their hands. Whether it is justified or not, both morally and politically, is a different matter.

But don't you think that the kidnapping and killing of mandal president, Malhar Rao, and police officers by PWG squads has led to a dangerous political situation?

On the other hand, what you have to see is the demands or conditions upon which these kidnappings and killings were done by the PWG. Their demand was not that NTR or Rajiv Gandhi should quit their governments to make way for a people's republic. On all such occasions, their demands were merely over the legal obligation of the government, such as to produce an arrested person in the court, to hold judicial enquiry into encounter killings, not to destroy memorials built by them for their dead comrades, etc. Since such are their demands, the question is: why is the government reluctant to fulfill its legal obligation before such incidents take place, especially when such demands are raised through public statements or from public platforms quite peacefully? If the government sets right these things, and keeps its own house in proper order, then there is some meaning to the talk about private violence. Otherwise, it is nonsense.

Since you were blind-folded and gagged and your hands were tied during your three-days-long kidnapping episode, how could you vouch that your kidnappers were policemen?

When they asked me to get down from the bus, I asked them who they were and they told me they were STF men. Then they took me to the Khammam police guest house. I could see the display board as I was not blind-folded then. No private organisation can have access to a police guest house. In one of their telephonic talks with the APCLC president, advocate KG Kannabiran, they warned him not to file any habaeus corpus petition, or else they would kill me. Now, who can worry about a habaeus corpus petition, except police? PWG squads, for example, never give such a warning when they kidnap somebody. During the following nearly three days of my captivity, I could remove the blindfold whenever they took me from place to place to see for myself the in-

side of the guest house. All journalists of Hyderabad, who are familiar with police methods, were telling right from the beginning of my kidnapping that the police were behind it.

What is your reaction to NTR's invitation to hold talks with the APCLC after your release?

After my release, the government sent feelers to us saying that it would like to hold talks with us to find a solution to the present problem. We want to avoid a certain trap, which may or may not be intended by the government, and that is, discussions with us should not take place on the premise that we represent the naxalites and that we can lay down some conditions under which the naxalites would give up violence. The government wanted to give such a picture so that in future they would say that despite holding discussions, the naxalites are continuing with their violence. Therefore, we made it very clear to the government in our proposals that we do not hold brief for the naxalites, nor can we give a guarantee on their behalf. We cannot even offer any solution to the problem. However, our main intention is to draw the government's attention to the extensive illegality it has been perpetrating and to the abdication of its constitutional obligation to provide

security and livelihood to the poor, so that at least now, if the government is willing to set right things on its part, there may be a basis for a solution.

We have only restated our oft-repeated demand: don't torture and kill people; don't re-arrest those released by courts; have an enquiry whenever you kill somebody; don't threaten advocates who appear on behalf of the arrested naxalites, etc, etc. It is really a ridiculous state of affairs that a legally constituted government needs to be requested by somebody not to do all these illegal and unconstitutional deeds.

How did the government react to your proposals?

Within a few hours, NTR said that he had seen our proposals and that he would hold talks with us. But, now he is dragging his feet. At a press conference later, he said that he wanted to have a "friendly talk" with the APCLC. We want to have a formal discussion with him, if at all he wants it, with agenda and minutes and all that, and also with responsible officials attending it. We do not want any friendly chat with him over a cup of tea.

What is your reaction to Rajiv Gandhi's criticism of the NTR government's move to construct memorials for the dead naxalite leaders?

The police have been demolishing martyrs' memorials since 1982. What happened in Mehboobnagar was that a PWG leader, Sudhakar Reddy, was accidentally drowned and killed. Seven memorials were built in seven villages in his memory and the police, as usual, destroyed all of them. What the NTR government agreed, after the kidnapping of a mandal president in that district, was not to build memorials for the naxalites, but to rebuild memorials which were unlawfully destroyed by the police. Rajiv Gandhi wanted to take political advantage out of this by giving an impression that the NTR government is building memorials for naxalites and that, therefore, NTR is abetting naxalite violence. It is a deliberate canard being spread by the Congress(I).