

New Delhi claims top Maoist rebel killed

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NEW DELHI

Indian security forces have killed a communist rebel leader in what home affairs minister Amit Shah called a “landmark achievement” in the fight against one of the world’s longest-running insurgencies.

Shah said troops had yesterday “neutralised 27 dreaded Maoists, including Nambala Keshav Rao”, general secretary of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), in an operation in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh.

CPI (Maoist) is an armed group that has played a leading role in the “Naxalite” movement that has been battling the Indian state since 1967. “This is the first time in three decades of Bharat’s [India’s] battle against Naxalism that a general secretary-ranked leader has been neutralised,” Shah wrote on X.

Indian social media users shared images of what appeared to be the corpse of Rao. Indian intelligence said he was behind several deadly attacks on

security forces, including one in 2010 in Dantewada in which 76 police officers died. Rao had a bounty of Rs15mn (\$175,000) on his head.

“In a situation in which the movement has already been enormously circumscribed and damaged, getting to someone at this level of the system is a

‘Getting to someone at this level of the system is a serious shock to the organisation’

serious shock to the organisation,” said Ajai Sahni, a counterterrorism expert.

Shah, a close ally of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has vowed to make India “Naxal-free” by March 2026. India has this year carried out one of its most extensive counter-insurgency operations against the Maoist rebels.

Recent security operations have greatly weakened the Naxalites. India claims its paramilitary police have

killed dozens of rebels in what it calls “encounters”, or gun battles, in Chhattisgarh, the heart of rebel activity. Shah said Operation Black Forest led to the arrest of 54 Naxalites and surrender of another 84 across the states of Chhattisgarh, Telangana and Maharashtra.

India’s Maoists mostly operate in thickly forested areas inhabited largely by indigenous tribal people. The insurgency centres on what Indians know as the “Red Corridor”, a swath of eastern, central and southern states. Many affected areas are rich in minerals, sparking conflicts over mining rights. Maoists claim to protect local communities from exploitation and seek to overthrow the government, establish a communist state and redistribute resources.

The violence has claimed thousands of lives but Manoj Joshi of the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi said the militants were now “virtually finished”, adding: “There have been so many ‘encounters’, with 10 people killed here and 20 killed there, that I don’t see how much capacity they have left.”