

## 24 CRPF men perish in Maoist ambush (INDIA)

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**A massive landmine blast that left 24 CRPF jawans dead in Chhattisgarh has exposed a serious fact: 13,225 square miles of the Bastar region is infested with landmines.**

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Admitting this here on Sunday, Chhattisgarh home minister Ramvihar Netam, after his return from Kunjer Nala, 12 km from Bijapur where the blast took place on Saturday evening, said, "We had defused 104 landmines in the last 20 months, but Maoists succeeded in triggering 226 explosions. They have mined the entire area."

CRPF jawans were going to the police camp at Kshetrapal near Gangalur when the anti-landmine vehicle in which they were travelling came under the impact of a landmine explosion. The vehicle was tossed 10 feet in the air and blown to smithereens. Twentythree jawans died on the spot, it is learnt. Another died in hospital later.

Terming the blast as the "biggest tragedy in the history of Maoist violence in Chhattisgarh," chief minister Raman Singh also demanded greater deployment for anti-Maoist operations in the state. Singh spoke to Union home minister Shivraj Patil asking for experts in guerrilla warfare and also "the most sophisticated anti-landmine technology available anywhere in the world".

Only last month, the defence ministry had sent 23 anti-landmine vehicles to the state. Singh rued the fact that these proved "ineffective in front of the might of the Maoists".

The state home minister, who visited the site along with DGP O P Rathor, claimed at least 100 kg of explosives were used. "The blast created a crater the size of a well," he said, adding that Maoists were unable to loot the jawans' arms and ammunition thanks to the bravery of the CRPF commandant who fought with the extremists.

One of the three survivors in the incident, CRPF commandant D K Toppo, has been admitted to the intensive care unit of Ambedkar Hospital here. He was airlifted to Raipur with two other critically injured jawans.

Speaking to TOI, Toppo said 30 to 40 Naxalists may have been involved in the blast. He said that when he heard the sound of the blast, his first thought was to fire in retaliation, but there was no response from the jawans, who he then realised were either dead or wounded seriously.

The CM said family members of the "martyrs" would be adequately compensated. They would be paid Rs 10 lakh each as insurance money in addition to their dependents getting jobs in government departments.

Interestingly, in the 10 major blasts which the state has witnessed so far, none of the Maoists have been punished. In almost all the cases, eyewitnesses, including policemen and security personnel, have turned hostile resulting in acquittal of the accused.

Meanwhile, the state government has asked the Centre to depute a team of army experts to analyse the explosives used at Gangalur. "It may RDX," the home minister said.

According to DG P Rat-hor, the people of Bijapur held a protest rally on Sunday and held condolence meetings in 50 villages.

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