

# Police action can't be driving force of anti-Naxal strategy, says Ramesh

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**R**URAL Development Minister Jairam Ramesh has now argued against making police action the "driving force" of anti-Maoist strategy, saying government apathy towards tribal areas and its failure to protect basic rights of tribal populations were behind the rise of Naxalism.

At the same time, he said that police and paramilitary forces had a "vital role to play" as "developmentalist" strategy alone would not take the government too far.

Delivering the Sardar Pa-

tel Memorial Lecture, Ramesh said issues such as land ownership and acquisition, relief and rehabilitation, and development activities must receive primacy. "My firm belief is that a complete revamp of administration and governance in tribal areas, especially in central and eastern India, is pressing need of the hour," he said.

"...let us be clear, paramilitary and police action cannot and should not be the driving force. The driving force has necessarily to be development and addressing the daily concerns of the people, of people who have every reason to feel alien-



ated," Ramesh said in his lecture, titled 'From Tirupati to Pashupati: Some Reflections on the Maoist Issue'.

Ramesh, who has made the Naxal issue one of the focus areas of his work at the Rural Development Ministry, said Maoist groups had been able to make space amongst tribal populations

only because governments had failed in their duties.

"It is not the Naxals who have created the ground conditions ripe for the acceptance of their ideology — it is the singular failure of successive governments both in the states and the Centre to protect the dignity and Constitutional rights of the poor and the disadvantaged that has created a fertile breeding ground for violence and given the Naxals space to speak the language of social welfare but in reality use that as a cloak to construct their guerrilla bases and recruit, most tragically, women and children in large numbers," he said.

In the process, the tribal populations had become victims twice over, "first of state apathy and discrimination and then of Naxal agenda", he said.

"What is clear is that we need a two-track approach — one that deals with the leadership of the Naxals, who wish to overthrow the Indian state, and the other which focuses on the concerns of the people they pretend/claim to serve," he said.

Ramesh supported the proposal to make blocks, instead of districts, the unit for identifying left-wing extremist areas and recommended creation of smaller districts. He

also suggested that the Centre provide funds for executing infrastructure projects.

"But the real challenge is how do you transform administration in tribal areas so as not only to give people a sense of participation and involvement but, more fundamentally, to preserve and protect their dignity? Empowering the tribals by giving access to basics, by giving them what is theirs by right and by securing their livelihoods is, to my mind, an absolute undiluted must. Here, issues related to land ownership and land alienation must receive over-riding priority," Ramesh said.