

who is caught can expect a severe beating. Three people were shot dead by the security forces in provincial towns last weekend and several were shot and injured in Kathmandu on April 11th.

The opposition, buoyed by its success, has extended its general strike indefinitely, but there are dangers ahead for the political parties. According to Bharat Mohan Adhikari, an opposition leader, the movement has taken on a life of its own, with demonstrations taking place spontaneously. While some events, such as a large and orderly gathering in the Kathmandu suburb of Kirtipur, have been principled and impressive, in other places gangs of youths have burned vehicles and intimidated the public. For the parties, maintaining control is a serious problem.

Few people in Kathmandu expect the government to fall soon. Unlike in 1990, the link with the Maoists makes any political solution much harder to find. But the regime now looks badly wounded. ■

India's revolutionaries

The east is red

DELHI

And so is the centre

FOR almost 40 years, increasingly large areas of India's remote rural hinterland have been disrupted by Maoist-inspired rebel armies, known as Naxalites, who oppose conventional government. In the early years they were periodically crushed in the states of West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh (AP). But over the past four years inadequate policing and lethargic governments have enabled them to increase. Last year, about 900 people were killed in Naxalite-inspired clashes. The number for the first three months of this year is nearly 40% up on the same period last year.

Five months ago, Naxalites invaded a town in the state of Bihar and freed more than 350 prisoners from jail. In February, 26 villagers were killed by a landmine in Chhattisgarh as they returned from an anti-Naxalite meeting. And on April 9th main-line railway tracks were blown up in Bihar. The government admits that 76 of India's 602 districts are badly affected, though the Asian Centre for Human Rights says Naxalites have influence in 165 districts, stretching from the border with Nepal down through eastern and central India to the edge of Karnataka in the south.

V.K. Duggal, the interior ministry's top civil servant, echoed his ministry's usual sanguine line a week ago when he called the situation "by and large under control". Manmohan Singh, India's prime minister,

seems to disagree. On April 13th he was due to address a meeting of chief ministers of 13 affected states about how to tackle the problem. At a similar meeting a year ago, he said extremism had "huge societal costs", impairing investment, employment and education.

The impact on the economy and on foreign investment is likely to grow. Aluminium companies have for many years steered away from the bauxite mining areas of AP because of the risks. Contractors on India's \$40 billion road-building programme have been disrupted by attacks and threats, especially in Bihar. Now Naxalite and Marxist groups have threatened to target mining operations in the state of Jharkhand's mineral-rich areas, where Rotterdam-based Mittal Steel, India's Tata Steel and others have drawn up plans for multi-billion dollar plants.

The Naxalites are a complex group. They take their name from Naxalbari, a West Bengal village where the movement was founded in 1967. They were wiped out there within eight years by tough police action, and next surfaced in the 1980s as the People's War Group (PWG) in an independence-minded area of AP called Telugana. Conflict between castes in Bihar led to the creation of the Maoist Communist Centre in the mid-1980s. This then merged two years ago with the PWG and started to build loose links with neighbouring Nepal, where Maoist rebels now control significant areas of the country, and with less significant groups in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

The movement thrives in remote, often densely forested areas, especially where tribal people risk losing land to development projects. "These areas have fallen off the map of governance as economic liberalisation has focused government attention elsewhere," says Ajai Sahni, director of the Delhi-based Institute of Conflict Management. Lack of international concern has encouraged government lethargy. Mr Singh wants to tackle this with a national policy that forces individual states to introduce effective policing, plus social-policy initiatives specially aimed at tribal areas. But the Naxalities keep growing stronger. ■

