
India: Reports of Forest Department involvement in violence against the Adivasi people

The Adivasi indigenous people have lived in India since time immemorial. Today they constitute an ethnic minority referred to pejoratively as “tribals”. These people, even though being descendents of the original inhabitants of India, over the course of time, have been pushed aside to more marginal areas, sloping areas, and forestland. Only some decades ago the Adivasi still lived in slavery, without any political or civil rights, obliged to work in the factories owned by the Indian and European people. Nowadays their territorial rights continue to be ignored. Moreover they are victims of violence and all kinds of abuses to expel them from the forests they inhabit.

Local communities report that during March and April 2001 the police and members of the Van Suraksha Samities (Forest Protection Committees) attacked a group of unarmed Adivasi people in the Dewas district of Madhya Pradesh. The aggression resulted in the deaths of four unarmed villagers.

This is not the first case reported in Madhya Pradesh regarding these sorts of human rights violations against indigenous forest peoples. On 23 September 1999, forest officials fired on the village of Kadudiya causing the death of adivasi Roopsingh Bhilala. There have been reports of numerous cases since the middle of March 2001 in which forest officials, police and armed teams of the Special Armed Force (SAF) have attacked Adivasi villages, demolished homes, looted property and assaulted people including women. Among the atrocities committed to the detriment of the Adivasi there have also been reported cases of kidnapping and contamination of food and water with herbicides. Despite a large peaceful protest on 29 May 2000, the Dewas administration has failed to act on complaints about such abuses. No judicial inquiries have been established and local people continue to suffer further repression. Additionally, no compensation has been granted to the affected villagers and their families.

Local villagers and activists in Dewas refute the allegations made by the authorities that they are armed and incite people to violence. They also reject any allegations that they are involved in harmful illegal timber extraction. As a matter of fact the recent atrocities are a consequence of their resistance to the predatory and corrupt practices of some Forest Department officials that allegedly practice illegal timber extraction on a commercial scale. Local activists point out that they have encouraged local people not to pay bribes to forestry officials for the right to continue with their customary livelihood activities. Activists claim that the recent violent campaign by local officials is a direct backlash against their opposition to the corrupt forest administration and the repressive practices of the newly formed Forest Protection Committees that have been formed under Joint Forest Management schemes established in recent years, with the support of the various organizations, including the World Bank.

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