
India: Indigenous peoples victims of "conservation" at Rajive Gandhi National Park

Two visions are confronted in relation to the conservation of protected areas. One of them --originated in the conservationist circles of the North-- considers that they have to be kept as natural scenarios, void of people. To make it possible, indigenous peoples and other local dwellers are seen as a menace which needs to be removed. From the modern viewpoint, nature needs to be considered in its coevolution with human cultures, and forest peoples constitute an essential part of this relationship, having a crucial role in forest biodiversity conservation.

India has been and still is a typical scenario of this conflict. Problems are frequent in India's national parks, sanctuaries, and other natural habitats, between government officials and NGOs involved in wildlife conservation on the one hand, and indigenous peoples, local communities and social activists on the other hand. Even though there has been a civil society initiative to address the problem, trying to build bridges between such opposite visions (see WRM Bulletin 3), indigenous peoples that have historically protected forest areas continue to be victims of abuse and violence to the hands of national authorities.

Such situation has happened again. After the brutal forceful dislocation of 51 families carried out by the Forest Department and the Police during midnight of June 12, last year, on July 23rd 2000, a large troop of Forest Department personnel arrived to the Kolengere tribal settlement in Nagarhole to forcefully dislocate the 30 tribal families from the settlement to a new "rehabilitation" site at Veeranahosalli, at the fringes of the National Park, and to demolish their existing dwellings. Local people tried to defend themselves from this attack, and were brutally repressed. Men and women were beaten by armed officers. Some very seriously injured individuals were admitted to hospitals at Gonikoppal and Kumara, while others were given primary treatments locally. Some local media, instigated by the Forest Department, falsely informed that local people were the ones instigating the clash with the support of NGOs like CORD, Kushalnagar and DEED, Hunsur.

The historical conflict between the Forest Department and the traditional inhabitants of the Park intensified during the last years with the move of the Government of Karnataka to implement the controversial World Bank Eco-development Project in the area. The official plan went ahead, even violating the operational directives of the Bank itself with regard to the Indigenous/Tribal Peoples, as well as their constitutional rights. Affected indigenous people have been facing abuses related to this project. The World Bank's Inspection Panel that visited the area on 1-3 September, 1998 justified the tribals' position. Nevertheless, the Government of Karnataka has preferred to turn a blind eye to reality, and continues insisting that there is no forceful dislocation, and that it has the full consent of the people concerned.

Protective Laws and Acts to safeguard the life of the ethnic minorities in India do exist, but they are often neglected and violated by the lawmakers themselves. Additionally, real victims of official violence are accused of rioting. Social and environmental Indian NGOs are claiming that a proper inquiry into the recent repression is performed, and the culprits are brought to trial.

