

30 April, 2007

To,
The Honorable Chief Minister,
Madhya Pradesh,
India

Subject: Police firing on 4000 Adivasis in Ghateha Village, Teothat (Tehsil), Rewa (District)

Dear Sir,

This has reference to the plight of the 1500 families comprising of 4000 Adivasis (including women and a large number of children), in Ghateha village (Teothar Tehsil/ Rewa District). It has been reported that Birsa Munda Bhu Adhikar Manch had taken possession of about 500 acres of land. Tribal families depended on this land for their livelihoods and subsistence. It is reported that even though the land in and around the area where these families had shifted was de-notified in July 1974, yet the forest department has made attempts to claim the land for itself, by declaring these tribals as "encroachers". Further, we have been informed that:

- On April 5, 2007, seventeen people of Ghateha village of Teothar tehsil in Rewa district were charge- sheeted under Dhara 26, 33 & 67 by the Forest Department; nine of them were put into jail, whereas eight are missing since then.
- On April 17, 2007 the SDM, SDOP and Forest Department officials had visited Ghateha village, and the villagers were told that they would be given Gram Sabha land provided they vacated the land that had been occupied by them recently. However, the villagers were also reportedly threatened with dire consequences if they did not oblige.
- On April 18 2007 the District Magistrate, Mr. B.C. Ahuja had given an assurance to the people that the status of the land would be investigated into and if it was found that it was forest land, then the current occupants would be given alternative appropriate land. However despite this assurance, on April 19 2007 police force had been deployed under the supervision of DFO, SDOP and Circle Officer. It has been reported that the police had opened fire on these adivasis after an initial round of tear gas shells. It has also been reported that:
 - 3 adivasis were killed and about hundred people injured in police firing; many are in critical condition
 - shelters and thatched houses have been razed and set on fire. It is feared that some children may have suffered burns and serious injuries
 - attacks on the people are still going on, especially women have been victims of police brutalities
 - there is an atmosphere of general terror. People have scattered, and no local is allowed to enter the village
 - a general FIR has been filed against 600 people and specifically against 29 named activists of Birsa Munda Bhu Adikar Manch and the National Forum of Forest Peoples and Forest Workers.
 - around 100 people are injured, many with bullet wounds and nobody to take care of them. No medical treatment is available. The village is still being surrounded by police.

It has also been reported that a statement was issued by the district administration attributing this action as a response to an earlier attack on the police by local activists who were connected with the naxalities. But this has also been refuted by locals. Hence, as concerned citizens of this country, and a civil society group

working in the area of environmental and social justice, we would like to request you to take cognizance of these reports and initiate investigative proceedings to ascertain their veracity and if found true:

- i. call for an immediate halt to all police action and withdrawal of police force;
- ii. provide immediate medical attention and treatment for the injured;
- iii. initiate an enquiry in to the incident by a sitting judge, and initiate action against those guilty of human rights or conservation violations;
- iv. provide full compensation to the villagers in lieu of property and valuables destroyed;
- vi. ensure protection of the human rights to land and livelihood of the tribals;
- vii. facilitate a just settlement of the land issue based on consensus and dialogue, and on the twin principles of ensuring conservation and livelihood security.

We request you to urgently intervene and ensure that the situation changes for the better.

Member – Kalpavriksh (Environment Action Group)

CC: Dr. Manmohan Singh, The Honorable Prime Minister of India, New Delhi
Shri P.R. Kyndiah, Minister of Tribal Affairs, New Delhi
Shri A. Raja, Minister of Environment and Forest, New Delhi