



# Forest Peoples Programme

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To Your Excellency Dr. Manmohan Singh,

We are writing to respectfully bring to your attention a recent incident which we fear is symptomatic of a wider and growing trend of violence against tribal peoples in economically valuable lands in India. We have been informed by our colleagues and friends of ours that on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April police entered the forest community of Ghateha in Rewa district in Madhya Pradesh and fired on women, children and members of the Birsa Munda Bhu Adhikar Manch.

We understand that the tribal villagers had taken possession of a piece of forest land which was de-notified in 1974 and then claimed back by the Forest Department, leaving community members as encroachers on their own land. The conflict around this land has, our colleagues tell us, increased over the past few months. We understand that there are some 1500 families who have built temporary shelters and jhopris to reaffirm their land ownership claims.

We recognize the difficult nature of land disputes, and support open and consensual processes of reaching mutually agreed and accepted principles for land ownership that fully respect human rights and customary systems of land tenure. However, in this case, efforts to settle the conflict in a calm and mediated manner were sidelined by the police action, which reports indicate was taken illegally and violently against the community.

Threats had allegedly been received by the community from the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) and other forest officials, and only a few weeks ago on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 15 villagers were charged and 9 incarcerated. In addition to this, our colleagues tell us that verbal threats were received on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of April the District Collector of Rewa came to the village and started negotiations with community members and assured them in front of the Samajwadi Party MLA K K Singh, Munnilal, one of the convenors of National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers (NFFPFW) and other activists from Uttar Pradesh and Rewa, that the villagers will be compensated with land after ascertaining the nature of this particular land under contention. We applaud commitments such as this to the peaceful settlement of conflicts over land use and tenure.

However, this important commitment seems to have been short lived. According to reports we have received, on the morning of April 19<sup>th</sup> a strong police force allegedly surrounded the community and fired tear gas shells into the village. This was followed, our colleagues tell us, with lathi charges and gunshots. We have been told that women were beaten as they formed a cordon around the community, and that the houses in the community were all burnt in this attack.

Around 100 are reported to be injured, many with bullet wounds and little access to any medical care. Apparently the village is still being surrounded by a strong police force.

We ask respectfully that you address this serious violation of Indian and international law, and protect the community from illegal and violent acts by the authorities. Specifically we would like to see:

- i. An immediate halt to all police action and withdrawal of the police force;
- ii. Immediate provision of medical care for injured people;
- iii. Strong administrative action against the DFO, other forest officials and local police officials;
- iv. A judicial enquiry in to the incident by a sitting judge.
- v. Full compensation to the villagers in lieu of property and valuables destroyed
- vi. A properly followed and consensual process of settlement of the land issue.

Yours sincerely

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Forest Peoples Programme