

UN Body Flags 'Unprecedented' Rights Violations Against Adivasis, Muslims and Forest Communities in India

Oindrila Dasgupta
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In communications sent to the Indian government on 19 January, the UN body warned that security, citizenship and conservation policies may be operating in racially discriminatory ways, raising concerns of systemic violations under international law.



Security personnel with the arms, ammunition and other items recovered from Maoists during a gunfight, in Hazaribag district, Jharkhand, Monday, Sept. 15, 2025. At least three Maoists were killed in the gunfight. Photo: PTI

New Delhi: The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) has triggered its early warning and urgent action mechanism over alleged large-scale human rights violations in India, citing killings, arbitrary arrests, forced evictions and denial of land rights affecting indigenous Adivasis in Chhattisgarh, Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam, and forest-dwelling tribal communities. In **communications sent to the Indian government on 19 January**, the UN body warned that security,

citizenship and conservation policies may be operating in racially discriminatory ways, raising concerns of systemic violations under international law.

In three separate communications sent in January 2026 to India's Permanent Representative in Geneva, the Committee invoked its early warning and urgent action procedure, a mechanism reserved for situations that may escalate into grave violations of rights protected under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). The letters collectively point to a pattern of excessive use of force, arbitrary detention, forced displacement, denial of consent over land and resources, and lack of effective remedies.

Bastar: Militarisation, killings and displacement

The most severe concerns relate to the Bastar region in Chhattisgarh, where Indigenous Adivasi peoples constitute around 70% of the population. CERD noted that since January 2024 there has been a sharp escalation in counter-insurgency operations amid a stated goal by the Indian government to eliminate non-state armed groups by March 2026.

According to information received by the Committee, this intensification has resulted in "widespread and unprecedented violence" against indigenous Adivasi civilians. At least 500 Adivasi people, including civilians, were reportedly killed between January 2024 and October 2025 during security operations. The Committee flagged inconsistencies between official records and figures documented by civil society and human rights defenders monitoring the region.

CERD also expressed alarm over reports that security forces used aerial bombing in at least five incidents between 2021 and 2025, targeting villages, agricultural land and forest areas inhabited by Adivasi communities. Such operations, the Committee warned, raise serious questions of proportionality and civilian protection.

The communication highlights a rapid expansion of security infrastructure in Bastar. Since 2019, at least 300 new security bases have reportedly been established, while the number of police stations has increased from 65 to more than 500 over the past decade. Many of these installations have allegedly been built on ancestral Adivasi lands without consultation or consent, in violation of constitutional protections under the Fifth Schedule, the Forest Rights Act, and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act.

Arbitrary arrests and criminalisation

The Committee documented a rise in arbitrary arrests and prolonged detention of Adivasi civilians under stringent security laws, including the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and the Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act. These detentions are often carried out without timely trials or due process.

Specific incidents cited include a May 2024 operation in Bijapur district in which security forces allegedly fired on villagers and farmers, killing at least ten civilians and arresting around fifty others. In another incident in February 2025, law enforcement personnel reportedly stormed homes in the early morning hours, forcing villagers to flee into forests while arresting around twenty-five people.

CERD further noted reports that officials publicly announced financial rewards and promotions for security personnel following operations that included alleged extrajudicial killings, contributing to what the Committee described as a climate of impunity.

Surrender policy and detention of civilians

While acknowledging Chhattisgarh's revised Surrender and Rehabilitation Policy of March 2025, the Committee raised concerns that surrendered individuals; predominantly indigenous Adivasis, were being deprived of liberty without due process. At one centre in Bijapur district, around 200 people, including women and children, were reportedly detained and forced to perform menial labour.

Human rights defenders, journalists and lawyers documenting abuses in Bastar have also faced intimidation, surveillance, harassment and arrest, according to the Committee. CERD cited the October 2024 declaration of the Moolwasi Bachao Manch (MBM), an Adivasi rights movement, as an unlawful organisation under state security law, and the lack of an effective independent review of that decision.

The Committee emphasised the absence of independent and impartial investigations into killings and abuses by security forces. It also pointed to what it described as systematic discrimination within the criminal justice system, where Adivasi victims killed during operations are routinely labelled as members of armed groups, blocking families from accessing legal remedies.

Assam: NRC, evictions and hate speech

In a separate communication, CERD revisited concerns regarding Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam, particularly in the context of the National Register of Citizens (NRC). While noting India's explanation that the citizenship framework does not bar eligible applicants, the Committee expressed regret over the lack of substantive responses to allegations of discrimination.

These include the disproportionate exclusion of Bengali-speaking Muslims from the NRC due to procedural irregularities, difficulties in obtaining documents, and their classification as "non-original inhabitants", a term the Committee said lacks clear definition. CERD also highlighted stricter verification standards applied to this group compared to so-called original inhabitants, as well as the suspension of Foreigners Tribunal proceedings that prevented many from challenging their status.

The Committee further raised concerns over allegations of systematic forced evictions of Bengali-speaking Muslim families across several districts in Assam without adequate housing or compensation. Reports of increased hate speech and incitement to violence during the 2024 national elections, excessive use of force

by law enforcement, and violent attacks by civilians and organised groups were also flagged.

Conservation and displacement of forest communities

The third letter focuses on tribal and forest-dwelling indigenous communities affected by conservation policies, particularly under the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA). CERD acknowledged India's submissions that relocation from core tiger habitats is meant to be voluntary and based on informed consent, noting that around 6,400 families and 590 villages currently fall within such areas.

However, the Committee expressed concern over the lack of detailed information on whether affected communities were meaningfully consulted or whether free, prior and informed consent was obtained. It also flagged the absence of impact assessment studies and raised concerns about the risk of eviction and displacement without adequate alternative housing, compensation or effective remedies.

CERD's demands and next steps

Across all three communications, CERD underscored that, if verified, the allegations could amount to serious violations of ICERD. The Committee recalled its previous recommendations on racial profiling, discrimination in the criminal justice system, and the rights of Indigenous peoples, and asked India to provide detailed information and clarifications during its forthcoming combined twentieth and twenty-first periodic reports.

While reiterating its willingness to engage in "constructive dialogue", the Committee's language signals growing alarm that security, citizenship and conservation frameworks in India are disproportionately harming marginalised communities, shrinking civic space, and obstructing access to justice. It also notes with concern the lack of meaningful action on issues raised in its earlier communication of May 12, 2025, regarding the same issues.

Responsible departments of the Indian government has been asked to respond with detailed information on investigations, safeguards, consent processes and remedial measures in the coming months. The Committee's findings are likely to intensify international scrutiny of India's human rights record, particularly in conflict-affected and minority-dominated regions.

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