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Conservationists demand NTCA to withdraw relocation of forest-dwelling communities from tiger reserves

It is alleged NTCA acted in violation of conservation framework and disregarded rights of forest-dependent communities

The conservationists warned that such a move would result in conflicts between state authorities and the scheduled tribes and other traditional forest dwellers.

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Conservationist organisations across India have demanded withdrawal of 'illegal' relocation of villagers from tiger reserves which is ordered by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA).

The notification issued on June 19, 2024, identified 89,808 families from 848 villages and directed the state authorities to relocate the residents living inside areas notified as core areas of the tiger reserves on a 'priority basis' and called for time-bound action plans.

These residents mostly belong to the Adivasi and other forest-dwelling communities and are entitled to live and use the forest produce for their livelihood as enshrined in the Forest rights Act, 2006 [FRA] as well as The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 [WLPA].

In a letter written to Bhupinder Yadav, the minister in charge of the Union ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC), the NTCA mentioned that there the above mentioned 89,808 families are living inside the critical tiger habitats or the core area of 54 tiger reserves across India.

"Of this, 257 villages with 25,007 families have already been relocated since the inception of the Project Tiger. Now 591 villages with 64,801 families are remaining inside the notified core," the letter stated.

Reacting to the demands in the letter, a press statement shared by the conservationist group stated that such a move would not merely be unfair but also illegal.

“The relocation of the NTCA is in complete violation of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 (as amended in 2006), the Forest Rights Act 2006, the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 (LARR) and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities), 1989 exhibiting a complete lack of compliance with the laws and the spirit of conservation,” the conservationists argued.

They stated that the displacement from 19 tiger states could be the largest such exercise ever conducted across the world touted as an objective for the conservation of wildlife.

The letter submitted to the MoEFCC said that the NTCA action mentioned that NTCA is pressurising the state governments to relocate communities in violation of WLPA and FRA, thereby forcing the State governments to commit illegalities.

‘Displacement could lead to conflict’

The conservationists warned that such a move would result in conflicts between state authorities and the scheduled tribes (STs) and other traditional forest dwellers (OTFDS) living within the tiger reserves.

Terming it as violation of constitutional rights, the conservationists alleged that the step exposes these communities to vulnerabilities such as economic and social insecurities, destitution and disruption of their eco-cultural fabric.

The group has pointed out that provisions under WLPA prohibits the apex tiger authority to issue any directives that interfere with the rights of local people, especially the Scheduled Tribes.

It also highlighted that the decision also violates the conservation efforts towards biodiversity and wildlife which these communities depend on for their sustenance. The conservationists also demanded the Union government to issue an immediate advisory on directing state authorities to implement the provisions of WLPA and FRA to recognise and hand over forest rights across all villages notified as tiger reserves including other protected areas.

“No person or community member must be relocated without exploring the possibility of coexistence as mandated in the provisions of the FRA and without the three levels of consent as mandated in the WLPA 2006,” the conservationist’s letter to MoEFCC stated. “The order must clarify that the relocations from core areas must be ‘voluntary’ and on ‘mutually agreed terms and conditions’ that ensure the recognition of the rights following WLPA 2006, FRA 2006 and LARR 2013,” it added.