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Maoists train guns on Similipal tiger project

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BARIPADA: The Maoist assailants involved in Sunday's rampage in Similipal have threatened to disrupt a tiger project in the famous reserve.

The threat was issued through Hindi and Oriya posters pasted on the walls of the forest rest house at Chahala. "Yeh jungle aur zameen hamara hai. Simlipal jungle mein adivasi logo ke upar tiger project ka dadagiri nahi chalega. Agar chala toh aag lagega (This jungle and land belongs to us. We won't allow the tiger project to be imposed on the tribals living in Similipal. If our diktat goes unheeded, we will set fire to the area)," one of the posters seized by STR officials from the area said. The Maoists also threatened the "Project Tiger" officials to quit the Core Area or else they would be killed, sources added. The field staff of the STR have now been patrolling along the "fringe areas" of the "Core Area" of the reserve, officials said.

The STR field director-cum-conservator of forest R.Naga Raja Reddy, said is suffering from shortage of field staff. There are only 49 forest guards against the sanctioned strength of 108. There are only eight range officers when there should have been 13. At least 17 posts of foresters are lying vacant against the sanctioned strength of 44. The field director said the Special Tiger Protection Force (STPF) conceived by the National Tiger Conservation Authority about a year ago should be constituted as quickly as possible. The STPF can protect the majestic tiger as well as combat Maoists threat. The NTCA has already approved constitution of one company of STPF in the line of Indian Reserve Battalion.

"The STPF personnel when recruited will receive special training from Orissa police as well as the Central paramilitary forces based on a special syllabus for skill development, combating poaching and enabling intelligence-based enforcement in a forest terrain," he said. And such a force was the need of the hour in Similipal, official said. Only its implementation is awaited, Reddy said. Reddy also pleaded for providing armed police personnel at all the seven range offices located inside Similipal Tiger Reserve as a "confidence building measure" for the unarmed forest official manning these range offices.

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