

Tribals demand first right to forests, write to PM

New Delhi: Over 150 tribal villagers and forest dwellers on Tuesday protested here against non-implementation of Forest Dwellers Act and submitted a memorandum to the prime minister demanding first right to forests.

Shankar Gopalakrishnan of Campaign for Survival and Dignity, the group organising the two-day protest, said: "We have submitted a memorandum to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as well as the minister for tribal affairs, pointing out serious problems in implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006."

"Unless these problems are addressed, any plan to complete implementation by Dec 31, 2009, will result in the denial of rights to the majority of eligible 'adivasis' (tribals) and forest dwellers," he added.

Among the demands that have been put forth is for issuing clear instructions to all state governments to halt "illegal diversion" of forest land for corporate projects.

"State governments are continuing to threaten people with illegal eviction for large projects in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh and elsewhere, which should be stopped," Gopalakrishnan said.

The campaigners are also demanding rights to individual landholdings and "preventing land mafias, corrupt officials and government agencies from damaging or destroying them".

"There is a two-day review meeting of the tribal affairs ministry and we request that these issues be discussed and addressed," Gopalakrishnan said.

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