

Reserve Police to help forest dept check encroachment

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Gandhinagar, June 15 Bracing up for a season of encroachments with an early onset of monsoon, the Forest department has requisitioned two companies of the State Reserve Police (SRP) to take on the menace of cultivation on the reserved forest areas.

The decision was taken following field reports that massive encroachment on forestlands could occur mainly in the Vadodara and south Gujarat forest circles, according to sources in the department.

Divisions in forest circles of Gandhinagar (Banaskantha and Sabarkantha), Vadodara (Panchmahals, Dahod), Surat and Valsad will be supplied between 20 and 30 SRP jawans to assist the forest staff in countering encroachments. The region consists of the eastern tribal belt of the state.

Traditionally, populations living on forest fringes indulge in cultivation on forestlands during rains. But what has attained the proportions of a headache for the department is the gradual conversion of such encroachments into permanent settlements.

With each beat having one forest guard, it becomes difficult to take on the organised cultivation activity that sees an increase during rains.

"Typically, this is the period when we have to be on our toes," said M L Sharma, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF).

He added: "Though fresh recruitments have been made at the beat guard level, the scale of activity warrants bolstering of field strength, making us request for the SRP. We experimented with this last year and are enlarging the scope."

The Forest Rights Act, which entitles land to forest dwelling communities with a cut off date to December 2005, has complicated the matter further.

"There is such confusion over the implementation of this act that some forest dwelling communities still believe that even if they make fresh encroachments they will somehow get titles over the land. We want to avoid that situation at any cost," said a senior forester.

An official fresh from a visit to the forests in the Mahal region of Dangs district said the scale of slash and burn cultivation is only to be seen to be believed.

"There is little dense forest left. The situation will not remain in control unless there is political unanimity on saving forests," he said.

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