

Bangladesh set to evict Garos from ancestral land

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TURA, Feb 9: There is simmering anger across the Garo Hills region over moves being made in the neighbouring country of Bangladesh where authorities are pushing for the eviction of several thousand Garos from their ancestral homes located in the forests of Modhupur, a Pleistocene terrace area of central Bangladesh, situated on the uplands of Mymensing and Tangail districts that has a large tribal population, which is famous for its dry deciduous Sal forests where ethnic communities like the Garos dwell.

What began as a protest against the eviction drive across the tribal belt in Bangladesh has now percolated to the majority Garo dominated region of western Meghalaya where tempers are flaring over the harassment being meted out to their counterparts in that neighbouring country.

A strong protest against the eviction drive was staged at the heart of Tura's deputy commissioner's office on Tuesday morning by men and women representing the organisation – Garoland State Movement Committee.

"We want the governments of Bangladesh and India to hear our opposition to what is happening to our Garo brethren in that country," said GSMC chairman Nikman Ch Marak.

Holding banners and placards, dozens of GSMC supporters shouted slogans condemning the eviction move taking place in Bangladesh.

While the Bangladesh government, through its forest department, claims all the forest area to be government land and has an intention to create an eco park, the indigenous Garos residing in the same forest maintain that this is their ancestral land which has been passed on through generations.

These affected tribals have been protesting for well over two weeks, ever since forest authorities of the Bangladesh government, began exerting pressure on them to vacate their lands.

The situation has taken centre stage across social media with many concerned Garos, not just in India but as far as Europe and America, voicing their concern over the planned eviction drive.

The GSMC has dashed off a strong protest letter to Chief minister Conrad K Sangma, who only two years ago had visited Bangladesh, calling upon him to pursue this burning issue with the Sheikh Hasina government.

“We stand in solidarity with the indigenous Garo people of Modhupur in their opposition to the eviction notice served to them by the Bangladesh forest department. The Garos of Modhupur are the indigenous tribal who have lived on their land for generations. Where is the question of them being illegal,” questioned the GSMC.

Following the eviction order slapped on them, the Garos inhabiting the Modhupur forests have been facing undue hardships and harassment. Reports have been emerging about threats and other forms of harassment to force them to leave their ancestral homes.

“The Garos had inherited this land from their forefathers since time immemorial. The failure to recognize the bonafide Garo settlers is very unfortunate on the part of the Bangladesh government and this will be raised at the international forum,” says Nikman Marak of GSMC.

In their letter to Conrad Sangma, the GSMC points out being indigenous tribes who inhabited the land for hundreds of years, the Garos of Modhupur fall in the protection category of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP).

The GSMC wants the state government to raise the issue with Prime Minister Modi since the current Bangladesh government led by prime minister Sheikh Hasina is more friendly than its predecessor from the Bangladesh National Party led by former prime minister Khalida Zia.

Who are the Garos of Modhupur?

According to well known professor Soma Dey from the University of Dhaka who produced a book on her research, the Garos have been considered as the earliest inhabitants of Modhupur Garh forest.

In the matrilineal society of Garos, women play the role of major provider of their family sustenance through exploiting biological resources of the forest. But the degradation of natural sal forest, which has become severe after the liberation war of Bangladesh, has made their task difficult. They are trying hard to cope with the degrading status of sal forest. Various changes have already taken place in their traditional societal structure and economy.

A part of the Pleistocene terrace area of central Bangladesh, Modhupur is situated over the uplands of Mymensingh and Tangail districts of central Bangladesh. The region is famous for the dry deciduous sal (*Shorea robusta*) forest and forest dwelling ethnic communities, especially the Garos.

It is believed that Garos, who love to claim themselves as Mandies meaning human beings, have been living in the forest for hundreds of years. The forest, acting as a natural boundary, kept them apart from the plain landers for a long time. This isolation and high dependency on forest resources for livelihood has resulted in the formation of their distinct societal structure and cultural practices.

Source: <https://theshillongtimes.com/2021/02/10/bdesh-set-to-evict-garos-from-ancestral-land/>