

AUGUST 9, 2024

INDIA

Immediate protection of life and liberty of Indigenous defenders at imminent risk

The Indigenous Peoples Rights International (IPRI) is extremely concerned about the physical attacks and arbitrary deprivation of liberty against Indigenous activists and victims of displacement in Rongajan Village near Kohora, Kaziranga Constituency, in Assam in Northeast India. IPRI is the international organization leading the Global Initiative to Address and Prevent Criminalization, Violence and Impunity against Indigenous Peoples

These indigenous defenders have been documenting the case of indigenous families displaced from their lands by the construction project of a luxury Hyatt hotel. One of them, Pranab Doley, was also a strong opposition contender in the past elections. We call on the State of India to guarantee the safety of the activists and the victims of displacement that were attacked and to immediately release those unjustly detained by the Bokakhat police.

According to witnesses, on August 7th around 8 pm, Manohar Pegu, a member of National Alliance for Peoples' Movement, and Ritupan Pegu, a member of Greater Kaziranga Land and Human Rights Committee, were surrounded by more than one hundred people while they were collecting the testimonies of 45 families displaced by a proposed Hyatt Hotel in Inglay Pathar. The mob started issuing threats against the two activists, as well as against Pranab Doley, Convenor of Greater Kaziranga Land and Human Rights Committee (GKLHRC), and Rajib Pegu, a GKLHRC member. They prevented Manoj and Ritupan from leaving the village while damaging the car that belonged to Doley.

Further, the mob assaulted Minali Gowala and her young daughter in their house in Rongajan. Minali is one of the farmers evicted from the land acquired for the proposed Hyatt Hotel and Resorts. Instead of taking the witness statement of Minali and her daughter, Bokakhat Police arrested Geeta Gowala, a farmer who had accompanied Minali and her daughter to the hospital.

When concerned friends of the indigenous defenders went to the local police in Bokakhat seeking their intervention, the police initially refused to take any action. Instead, a few policemen attacked them and detained Saurav Patgiri, an independent research scholar, and Subham, a local youth who had accompanied Saurav.

While there was no action against the mob, the police officials illegally detained Manohar and Ritupan along with Minali Gowala. Saurav and Subham continue to be in the custody of Bokakhat Police.

Pranab Doley, who has been vocal in claiming the rights of the people against the handover of the land to the luxury project, was also a strong contender in the past elections. Community members believe the assassination attempt against him could be interpreted as an attempt to decimate the political opposition.

Over the last two years, GKLHRC, a mass organization comprising more than 100 villages in Kaziranga, has submitted numerous memorandums demanding land rights for the people evicted from their homesteads in Inglay Pathar. They have documents proving their hold over these lands. Yet, on June 7, the District Administration demolished the house of one Adivasi farmer leading to a mass protest.

Given that the land is also a grazing ground for the wild animals from Kaziranga, a section of conservation organizations including UNESCO World Heritage Sites advisory bodies have asked the Assam Government to immediately stop the diversion of the said land for 5-star hotels. More importantly, the National Green Tribunal has taken cognizance of the issue, and there is a case against the transfer of the land in Kaziranga pending in the National Green Tribunal (NGT).

As a result of the land diversion, land speculators and politicians who would have benefited immensely from the transfer of the land have been misleading a section of people against GKLHRC and the people opposing the dispossession.

Given the gravity of the situation, IPRI calls upon the State of India to:

- Ensure the immediate release of Geeta Gowala, Manohar Pegu, Ritupan Pegu, Saurav Patgiri and Shubham and the withdrawal of all cases against the Bokakhat youth.
- Conduct thorough and independent Investigation and take action to hold accountable those that have perpetrated the attacks and evictions.
- Ensure the accountability of police officers who assaulted the activists and defenders
- Provide security for the 45 displaced families in Rongajan and ensure their safety
- Immediately resolve the conflict by ensuring the respect and protection of the rights of Indigenous peoples being subjected to violence and attacks, including their rights to the lands and resources, to their free, prior and informed consent, and to their right to live in peace and harmony with each other and with their lands and resources.