

NTCA letter to expedite forest relocation from tiger zones draws activist ire

Though *The Hindu* has only viewed this letter, similar letters have been sent to other States too; senior Environment Ministry official says these letters are 'routine' and periodic reminders to States

Published - September 07, 2024 03:38 am IST - NEW DELHI



JACOB KOSHY



A tiger is seen yawning in a pond amid the monsoon season, at Assam State Zoo, in Guwahati. | Photo Credit: ANI

A recent letter by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) — the apex body tasked with tiger conservation — asking 19 States to “prioritise” the removal of villagers who are residents in the core tiger zones has drawn the ire of several organisations and

activists, who have written to Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav protesting these directions.

“It has been observed that 591 villages comprising 64,801 families are still residing in the core area (of the tiger zone). The progress of village relocation is very slow and it poses grave concern in the light of tiger conservation,” said the letter written by G.S. Bharadwaj, Additional DGF (Project Tiger) and Member Secretary, NTCA to Subhash Malkede, Chief Wildlife Warden, Karnataka on June 19 this year. Though *The Hindu* has only viewed this letter, similar letters have been sent to other States too. Karnataka has 81 villages in the core zone with 1,175 families having been relocated since the inception of Project Tiger in 1973.

The ‘core zone’ refers to the portion in a tiger reserve where tribals cannot live and activities such as hunting and collecting forest produce is banned. There is a concentric circle outside the ‘core zone’ called the buffer zone where these restrictions are eased but regulated.

There are 53 tiger reserves in India across 19 States with 848 villages comprising 89,808 families in the core zone. Since 1973, 257 of these villages comprising 25,007 families have been relocated. The Wildlife Act says that core zones are to be ‘inviolable’ and these must be made so by coaxing residents to “voluntarily relocate” on “mutually agreed terms and conditions”.

“We are appalled at the step taken by the NTCA directing the relocation of the forest dependent communities in flagrant violation of all the relevant laws,” said the letter by the organisations dated September 5 and addressed to the Union Minister.

The letter alleges that NTCA’s relocation orders were in “complete violation” of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, the Forest Rights Act, the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act (LARR), and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

“The NTCA action put pressure on the State governments to relocate communities...forcing the State governments to commit illegalities. This would lead to massive conflicts between

State authorities and the Scheduled Tribes and other forest dwelling tribes living in the tiger reserves,” the letter added.

A senior official in the Environment Ministry, who declined to be identified, told *The Hindu* that these letters were “routine” and were periodic reminders to States to make core zones inviolate. “The process of relocation is voluntary and cannot be done without settling the rights of forest dwellers. There are several success stories but it is a necessarily slow process as the data will show.”

Published – September 07, 2024 03:38 am IST