

## Minister Biswajit justifies forest protection measures

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**Imphal, March 12 2023:** Forest and environment minister Thongam Biswajit has said that the measures taken up by the government to protect reserved and protected forest areas are under the legal limit and it is not against any community.

Addressing a press conference at the head office of forest department here on Sunday, Biswajit expressed regret that he could not issue the statement earlier due to media holiday on account of Yaoshang festival.

He said that the government does not discriminate against any community residing in the state and it would be wrong to add communal tinge on the government and its activities.

The minister said that the eviction drive at K Songjang village on February 20 was carried out under the provisions of Indian Forest Act, 1927, Forest Conservation Act 1980 and Manipur Forest Rules 2021 after serving necessary eviction notice.

There was no legal loophole in the eviction drive and similar drives were also carried out in different parts of the valley area.

None of the affected families raised any complaint against the government as they are aware of their offence and it shows the legal validity of the operation taken up by the government.

Eviction of 69 houses from Waithou Protected Forest area, 19 houses from Langol Reserved Forest area, 26 houses from Iroishemba Langol Reserved Forest area, 86 houses from Heingang Reserved Forest area, and 76 houses from Nongmaiching Reserved Forest area were public knowledge, the minister said.

The Supreme Court of India in its ruling in 1995 stated that illegal activities by individuals or communities in reserved or protected forest areas violating Indian Forest Act 1927 and Forest Conservation Act 1980 shall be treated as encroachment.

The apex court ruling also stated that any order issued in contravention of its decree shall be null and void.

Similarly, the state government had also published notification declaring any such orders issued in violation of the relevant Acts and Rules as null and void, he said.

Biswajit further said that Churachandpur Khoupum Protected Forest was notified in 1966 under Indian Forest Act.

Section 30 of the Act "prohibits, from a date fixed, the quarrying of stone, lime or charcoal, or the collection or subjection to any manufacturing process, or removal of, any forest produce in any such forest, and the breaking up or clearing for cultivation, for building, for grazing cattle or for any other purpose, of any land in any such forest".

The earliest notified reserved forest in the state is Heingang Reserved Forest, which was declared by Manipur State Durbar in 1913. Similarly, Cheklafai Reserved Forest was declared in 1945, Khamenlok Gwaltabi Reserved Forest in 1946, Kangchup Chiru Reserved Forest in 1948, Dampi Reserved Forest under Churachandpur Forest Division in 1951, and Nongmaiching Reserved Forest in 1990. All records pertaining to notification of reserved and protected forest areas of the state are compiled in the department's green book, he said.

With regard to Churachandpur-Khoupum Protected Forest, there is record of recognition of a village called Kumpi Naoshen in 1926. The government does not take up any step to evict villages, which predate the declaration of reserved or protected forest areas.

K Songjang village is a new settlement located at a distance of around 1.3 km from the old village.

As per satellite imagery, there was no settlement in the area till 2017 .

Around three or four houses were constructed in 2021 and number of houses increased in 2022. As per the rule, they can be evicted without serving any notice but adequate time was given to the families to relocate on humanitarian ground.

At the same time, there is no official record or document granting recognition to K Songjang village.

The only document available in the department is a note dated August 25, 2014 on the existence of the village, which is not a document for granting recognition of the village, he elaborated.

Biswajit further said that the total area of the state is 23,327 square kilometres.

In 1997, the department recorded total forest area of the state as 17,418 square kilometres with a geographical area of 74.7 per cent of the state's total area.

Unfortunately, the actual area of forest land is decreasing every year since then.

Lack of proper knowledge on reserved, protected and unclassified forest areas, and restrictions on activities in these forest areas may be one of the reasons behind the shrinking forest area, and it ultimately leads to further degradation of climatic condition of the state.

Erratic rainfall and drastic change in climate are the reasons of such activities, he said.

The minister further informed that the total area of reserved forest in the state is 984.26 square kilometres and protected forest is 4171.70 square

kilometres.

Areas covered by sanctuary and national parks related with wildlife are defined at Protected Area Network (PAN) and it covers 32.015 square kilometres.

Total area of unclassified forest, which is pending for proper demarcation, is 11,130.725 square kilometres.

These forest areas need protection for the future and it is the duty of the present generation towards the future generation, he stressed.

Biswajit also said that there are 36 reserved forests and 22 protected forests in the state.

All these forests were notified by Manipur State Durbar and past governments decades ago under Indian Forest Act 1927. The state government has no authority to amend the provisions of the Act.

However, there are rooms for consideration of any old settlement, which missed deadlines for raising claims, to raise fresh claims that the villages predated the date of notification for reserved or protected forest areas.

The government cancelled 38 orders related with Churachandpur-Khoupum Protected Forest and the government received a claim.

In 1971, the then state government constituted an enquiry committee to look into the claim.

RF Khan, enquiry officer of the panel, instead of submitting the enquiry report, issued an order misusing his position and power.

However, the then government cancelled the order as it had no legal validity, he said.

Citing Life for Environment (LiFE) Mission launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to save environment for the future, the minister appealed to the public and BJP workers to cooperate in the government's initiative to plant more trees and protect forest areas.

He also said that the government has initiated a policy for planting fruit bearing trees in forest areas and provide income generating opportunities to forest dwellers by constituting Joint Forest Management Committees.