

Form panel to visit forest diverted on Assam-Nagaland border: NGT to Environment Ministry

The Assam Forest Department allegedly allowed the use of 28 hectares of the Geleky Reserve Forest in the Sivasagar district to establish an Assam police commando battalion

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THE HINDU BUREAU



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The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has asked the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change to constitute a three-member committee to survey a part of a reserve forest on the Assam-Nagaland border allegedly diverted for the establishment of an Assam police commando battalion.

The NGT also issued notices to the Environment Ministry, the Assam government, the Assam Forest Department, and two others to file counter-affidavits within four weeks from May 29. This followed the hearing of a petition by eastern Assam-based environmental activist Rohit Choudhury against the diversion of the forest land.

According to the petition, Assam's former Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Head of Forest Force, M.K. Yadava had "misused his power and position to illegally divert a large part of the forest area without fulfilling the requirements of compensatory afforestation and net present value". This, it argued, made him liable for compensating and restoring the damage done to the forest.

Mr. Yadava is now the Special Chief Secretary (Forest) in the Assam government.

The petitioner also cited a letter by the Shillong regional office of the Environment Ministry, which said the use of forest land for non-forestry activities was allowed without prior permission of the central government in contravention of the provisions of the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, 1980.

Mr. Yadava reportedly wrote to the Forest officer concerned, citing a relevant section of the Forest (Conservation) Act to say that the construction of a police battalion can be approved "in the interest of conservation and protection of forest land" at Geleky.

The battalion was deemed necessary to prevent people from Nagaland from encroaching upon the forest along the interstate border. Assam and Nagaland have a long-standing boundary dispute that has claimed more than 150 lives between 1979 and 2021.

“We are of the opinion that the matter relates to the substantial environmental issue and violation of Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, and requires consideration,” NGT’s judicial member, Justice Sheo Kumar Singh and expert member, Arun Kumar Verma said in the order.

Apart from listing the case on August 9, the NGT said the Additional Director General of Forest dealing with Forest (Conservation) Act in the Environment Ministry should be the nodal officer for filing a report after visiting the Geleky site.

In 2023, the Environment Ministry criticised Mr. Yadava for approving the construction of a commando battalion unit on about 44 hectares of forest land on the Assam-Mizoram to deal with encroachment by people and agencies in Mizoram. Assam also has a boundary dispute with Mizoram.