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[Orissa Plus]

Tribals attack Vedanta team

;Statesman News Service

BHUBANESWAR, BHAWANIPATNA, 3 AUG: In what appeared to be a swift retaliatory action, tribals armed with traditional weapons intercepted, attacked and drove away a survey team of the Vedanta Alumina company even as they were moving towards the Niyamgiri hill top today.

Ten persons from the VAL were proceeding to the hill top to conduct pre-mining demarcation survey work today when they were intercepted. The survey team escaped unhurt but the armed tribals damaged the vehicle in which they were traveling.

They were carrying bow and arrows and an axe, said police sources in Lanjigarh. Fearing the worst, the team fled, leaving behind the vehicle which was subsequently torched by the angry tribals, said reliable sources. The sources said the miscreants were from the bordering Rayagada district and had warned the VAL officers not to venture into the Niyamgiri hills.

A police team led by SDPO Mr AKNayak is camping at Lanjigarh and investigating into the matter but they have not visited the spot fearing the involvement of Maoists. Since there is speculation over whether the mob was carrying guns, police have been very cautious, said these sources.

It is also learnt that the company authorities are yet to lodge a formal police complaint as they are exploring avenues for an 'amicable settlement'.

Meanwhile a section of social activists in Rayagada and Kalahandi districts believe that today's incident was retaliatory in nature as unidentified goons had waylaid a team of rights activists at Dahikhal on 25 July when they were on their way to address a meeting opposing the mining of the Niyamgiri hills by VAL.

The activists, including Mr Prafulla Samantara, Gandhian Professor Mr Bhagabat Rath and Mr Lingaraj, were shooed away by the miscreants who allegedly ordered them not to act against VAL. Mr Samantara and others were however rescued by local people and tribals. They had lodged a FIR in this connection and stated that if the police failed to prevent such crime and protect the democratic rights of activists, tribals who are resisting the mining of the Niyamgiri hills will be forced to defend themselves.

Mr Samantara today said he had submitted a copy of his FIR to the DGP for necessary action as he did not trust the local police.

Addressing a Press conference at Bhubaneswar today Mr Samantara who has been leading the anti-mining movement said Niyamgiri is ecologically critical to the state and country. It is also worshipped by the tribes of the region, he said, while referring at length to the protests in London last week wherein celebrities like Joanna Lumley, Bianca Jagger and Arundati Roy had impressed upon the Church of England's ethical investment group to take note of the plight of the Dongria Kondh tribes of the Niyamgiri hills.

The voice of the Dongria Kondh tribe has reached London, but here in Orissa the government has turned deaf, alleged Mr Samantara.

He charged that expansion of the VAL project in Lanjigarh started well before the public hearing was held in Belamba on 25 May, 2009 and it continues without waiting for any formal clearance from the ministry of environment and forests.

Local activists and international organizations will start probing into the political funding aspects, he said, while demanding that a team of experts from the ministry inspect Niyamgiri and verify the damage already done to the hills. "Niyamgiri should be

declared a national ecological heritage and protected," he said.

Raising another issue, Mr Samantara said mining in Niyamgiri cannot be allowed due to the passage of the Forest Rights Act 2006 as Section 4 (5) of the act bars the removal of any tribe or forest dweller.

Discussion on this Orissa Plus item

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