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Panel to place bauxite report next month

OUR CORRESPONDENT



A Dongria Kondha family. Picture by Sanjib Mukherjee.

Bhubaneswar, July 10: The N.C. Saxena Committee constituted by the Centre to look into allegations of forest dwellers of Lanjigarh bauxite mines area spread over Kalahandi and Rayagada districts will submit its report next month.

Saxena was in Orissa this week for an assessment of the much-disturbed bauxite mining area and allegations of violation of forest rights.

Saxena had already visited Lanjigarh and had interacted with the primitive tribal (Dongria Kondh) people there.

"This is not the final visit. A three-member team will soon visit Kalahandi and our final assessment report would be submitted to the central government next month," said Saxena, a member of the National Advisory Council (NAC).

Saxena returned from Kalahandi today and held a review meeting with chief secretary Tarunkanti Mishra.

Vedanta Aluminium has already got the Stage-1 clearance from the ministry of forest and environment to source bauxite ore from 660.749 hectares of forest area on the Niyamgiri hill for its alumina refinery at Lanjigarh. Niyamgiri has a deposit of 1,950 lakh tonnes of bauxite.

After Stage-1 clearance was granted, the primitive tribes and environmentalists began protesting on several grounds.

The mining site on top of the Niyamgiri hills is considered sacred by the local Dongria Kondhs.

Opposing Vedanta's much-hyped project, a mass movement is going on since 2004. On April 7, 2004, the Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti, an organisation of one thousand tribal people of the area, was formed to protect the forest, land and water of the area, giving the slogan, "*Vedanta Hatao*" (Remove Vedanta).

The people's cause has been taken up by another organisation known as Green Kalahandi.

All these organisations have filed separated memoranda to the Centre and the state government.

Due to resistance by political parties and the local people, the ministry of forest and environment had constituted a three-member committee in January 2010 to consider and make recommendations to the government on the proposal submitted by Orissa Mining Corporation (OMC) for diversion of forest land in Lanjigarh.

The three-member committee had submitted its report, based inter-alia on the site inspections conducted by them in the months of January and February 2010.

After considering the report, the ministry of forest and environment felt it necessary to constitute another committee headed by Saxena to address some pending issues before giving a final decision on diversion of forest land.

The four-member committee headed by Saxena is looking into all aspects of the project proposal, including allegations of violation of forest rights of Dongria Kondhs. The committee was constituted in June 2010.

"The state government is also looking into the allegations of local tribes. In 2003 when the Stage-1 clearance was awarded to Vedanta, there were no allegations from the local community on violation of their rights," said chief secretary Mishra.

Subsequently, the Centre enacted the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act in 2006, rules for which were framed in 2008. Soon after the rules were enacted, allegations of violation of forest rights started haunting the state government.

"However, we will not deprive the people of their forest rights. We will make through inquiries into the allegations individually. Fresh grama sabhas will be organised to settle the issue," the chief secretary added.

"Parallel to the state government's inquiry into the allegations of forest right violations, the Raygada and Kalahandi district collectors will also personally hold talks with the primitive tribes and the organisations opposing the project,"

Mishra said.

He added that the process would be completed within two months.

The chief secretary, however, asserted that all stages are cleared for Vedanta group to get Stage-II nod.

