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REDD alert for India's forest-dwellers

The agreement over Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) — a global regime to protect forests — likely at the climate summit in Cancun may create livelihood issues for Indian tribals and forest-dwellers, experts have warned.

The feared alienation has started in Indonesia, where oil companies have taken over forestland to neutralise emissions from their plants in Russia. "The project is expecting to prevent 75m tonnes of carbon being emitted over 30 years, which could earn the firms \$750m at a carbon price of \$10 a tonne," a report by NGO Friends of Earth (FOE), released before the summit, said.

The REDD scheme is central to slowing or halting deforestation and is likely to be approved at Cancun. But critics say that the scheme amounts to privatisation of natural resources.

"The REDD is in conflict with the Forest Rights Act (FRA)," said Shankar Gopalakrishnan of NGO Campaign For Survival and Dignity, which has been fighting for rights of tribals.

FRA provides for rights of tribals and forest-dwellers. But under REDD, governments can allow companies to take over forests to sequester their carbon emissions. In return, the government will get paid and part of the money can be shared with forest-dwellers.

BS Kishwan, Additional Director General of Forest in environment ministry, however, said, "REDD is not intended to take away rights of indigenous people but to provide them money to protect forests." But he said lack of definition of forests in India can pose problems in implementation.

The British did not define forests and now Indian governments go by dictionary meaning of forest, as directed by the Supreme Court in 1960s. "It will help the companies to... persuade governments to redefine what constitutes a forest," said the FOE report.

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