Subject: Calling urgent attention to the eminent forced eviction of indigenous Gond people for expansion of Panna Tiger Reserve

Dear Sir/Madam,

We would like to draw your urgent attention to the serious threats of forced eviction of indigenous Gond families for expansion of Panna Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh, Central India. Presently, more than 200 Gond tribals in Umaravan village of Panna district are living in darkness as the government authorities of India have cut off electricity to the village as one of the tactics to force them out of their houses and lands where they have long survived by living off their land and surrounding forests.

The Panna District Collector had served the Gonds legal notice to evict from their houses in February 2015 with offer of cash compensation. When they objected to the notice, they were coerced to give consent without written or accurate information for their resettlement and livelihood alternatives. They have not accepted the compensation amounts forcefully deposited in their bank accounts. In August 2015, the District Administration had disconnected the electricity lines and other development facilities to the village and let loose elephants in the forests around Umravan village to create a situation of panic and force the tribals to flee the village.

Later on September 2015, local police and forest officials descended in Umaravan village and threatened to evict the Gonds forcefully if they do not vacate willfully in the next few days. After that, off the 108 families in the village, 51 have already left. Due to anxiety of eviction, some families moved in search of work and alternative places to relocate in the event of being thrown out. Since all sources of livelihoods of the Gonds have been alienated, most families are facing severe shortage of food. Some families have been forced to use the compensation money for lack of any other support as most families have silicosis victims who need continued medical treatment. The economic situation of the Gonds is very distressing and this is the desperation that wildlife authorities target at so that people just leave the villages to survive.

Few of the tribals have received title deeds to their lands under Forest Rights Act while others were awaiting decisions in village council process of land titling that was ongoing. However, there are very few Gond families who stand eligible for FRA as this is not a scheduled area because of which non-tribals have historically grabbed tribal lands and made them landless
labour or forest dependent foragers. Local organizations are mobilizing the villagers for community forest rights and individual land rights, where possible.

The Gonds are one of the largest tribal communities in central India. They have been guardians of the forests for generations. Ongoing efforts for acquisition of their lands to expand the Tiger Reserve is blatant violation of their rights over their lands, forests and livelihoods as Scheduled Tribes under Forests Rights Act of India and as indigenous peoples under international laws. Further, the forced evictions through verbal intimidation, restriction of access to forests for their domestic needs and livelihoods as well as withdrawal of basic amenities even infringe on their basic human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The Gonds and their advocate organizations/individuals have filed a writ petition at the State High Court demanding acquisition of Gond lands and expansion of the Tiger Reserve be halted and their rights be protect as per Forest Rights Act and other national laws of India. The court case is ongoing; however, the hearing has been postponed repeatedly.

We, the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) and civil society organizations in India, have submitted written urgent appeals, on behalf of the Gond tribals, to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and other concerned authorities for immediate intervention demanding immediate intervention to stop forced evictions of indigenous Gond people from their lands and protect their rights over their lands, territories and resources, in consultation with them. We have also communicated with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of indigenous Peoples and other UN mechanisms for intervention on the issue. However, the authorities in India are yet to provide any concrete response while the threat of forced evictions in Umrawan village still remains.

Umrawan village is only a representative case of 59 villages around Panna Tiger Reserve – 13 of which have already been forcibly evicted and others are facing threats thereof. The so-called relocation of the villages are usually administered with blatant violations of the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, which clearly states that a village can only be relocated with the consent of the people. The adivasis do not want to leave their villages but are too intimidated to voice their protests. If all the villages are evicted, this will lead to serious disintegration of a large Gond population in the district, converting them into landless migrant labour with no social security or work safety or guarantee.

On the other hand, another threat to the adivasi population is the establishment of the new diamond-mining project in the adjoining Chhatarpur district where 954 hectares of land is in the process of being leased out to international mining behemoth Rio-Tinto for setting up Bunder Mines. Most of the land includes the area of the protected forests. 75 hectares from the leased area comes under the buffer zone of Panna Tiger Reserve. Thus, it is evident while tribal lives and well being are considered less important compared to conservation of flora and fauna, the same rules of conservation do not apply against vested business interests.

Several recommendations have been made in the 2005 Report of the Tiger Task force of the Government of India, where the experts acknowledged that it would not be possible for the
authorities to relocate all the villages present in the Tiger reserves of the country.iii The Tiger Task force clearly states that the process of Tiger Protection has to take into account the forests and the people who reside in and around it and that conflict can only be addressed through co-habitation and co-existence. This form of eviction is neither saving the tiger nor the tribal. Most of the recommendations focus on the establishment of sustainable livelihood for the people by allowing them to coexist with the forests and the tigers within the reserve.iv

As per the information on the website of the WWF-India, we are informed that the organization is supporting conservation work in the Panna Tiger Reserve. We would appreciate it if you can provide us with more information on the involvement of WWF on the Panna Tiger Reserve and in particular on the expansion of the reserve. We further request your organization to seriously consider the violations of human rights of Gond people and raise this issue with the concerned authorities in India in your engagement with them for your engagement in the Tiger Reserve. Your collaboration would significantly help in your conservation efforts as well as ensuring the protection of human rights and the wellbeing of the Gond people.

We look forward to your response on the matter. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you need further information on the matter.

Kind regards,

Joan Carling
Secretary General
Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)
www.aippnet.org

Also, on behalf of the following organizations
1. Prithvi Trust, Madhya Pradesh, India
2. Mines, Minerals and People, Ahmedabad, India
3. Setu Centre for Knowledge and Action, Ahmedabad, India
4. Dhaatri Resource Centre for Women and Children, Andhra Pradesh, India
5. Keystone Foundation, Tamilnadu, India
6. Sanjeevini, Andhra Pradesh, India
7. Velugu Association, Andhra Pradesh, India
8. Veerabali Rural Development Society (VRDS), Andhra Pradesh, India
9. Margadarshak Seva Sanstha, Chattisgarh, India
10. Adivasi Mitr, Andhra Pradesh, India
11. Gram Vikas Saradhi Trust, Andhra Pradesh, India
12. Samata, Andhra Pradesh, India
i [link](http://iphrdefenders.net/india-stop-forced-evictions-of-indigenous-gond-people-for-expansion-of-panna-tiger-reserve/)

ii [link](http://iphrdefenders.net/india-communication-to-un-special-procedures-for-immediate-intervention-to-stop-forced-evictions-of-gond-tribals-in-panna-tiger-reserve/)

iii Joining the Dots 03 - *A Way Ahead*: The Report of Tiger Task Force (2005); pg. 115

iv Ibid