

# New research predicts rising trend in India's Violent Land Conflicts; 130 districts struggle

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New research released today, on the eve of an international conference on land and forest rights, blames India's government agencies and investors for a growing spate of violent clashes in the nation's forest and tribal areas. A massive transfer of resources from the rural poor to investors is underway, inciting resistance and conflicts in virtually all states of India. Top global experts at the meeting noted as well that India has joined the ranks of China, South Korea and Saudi Arabia—"land-deficit" countries—that are snatching up stretches of prime livelihood resources in developing nations to grow crops and extract commodities for domestic and global markets.

The ongoing land takeover in India is captured in new findings released today and illustrated on a map recording recent protests in 130 districts, most of which took place since 2011.

According to findings released by the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) and the Society for Promotion of Wastelands Development (SPWD) in New Delhi today, the nation can expect rising civil unrest in response to major projects planned for the next 15 years, requiring over 11 million hectares of land and affecting the livelihoods and welfare of millions of people.

"Brazen takeovers of community-owned lands have become a burning issue in large parts of India," said Shankar Gopalakrishnan of the Campaign for Survival and Dignity, one of the researchers presenting at tomorrow's *Conference on Forests and Common Lands: Rights, Conflicts, Forest Rights Act (FRA) and Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA)*.

Gopalakrishnan and his colleagues note that India has legislation on the books already that could address the root causes of the conflicts reported in their studies. Two key examples are the *Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006*, which

is designed to protect forest dwelling and tribal people from illegal takeovers, but is being routinely violated; and the *1996 Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (the PESA Act)*, which gives village councils, known as gram sabhas, powers to manage and protect their lands. State laws that provide for community and collective rights and management powers are also ignored and violated across the country.

"Right now, one part of the government or another is in violation of the provisions of these Acts. Is there no penalty for violating legislation already on the statute books?" said RRI executive director Arvind Khare, a global expert on land rights of traditional and forest communities.

Citing research carried out by the International Land Coalition (ILC) Land Matrix, he said that the Indian government and Indian-owned companies have acquired land in Africa and Southeast Asia for agricultural purposes.

## India Joins Ranks of Major Investors in Global Land Grab

Increasingly, Khare said, investors from emerging economies are beginning to encounter community resistance to their activities in the rich agricultural nations of Africa, much like that faced by investors in India. But India's role in the global land rush is difficult to assess. Land deals are rarely transparent, so information about them is limited.

However, analysis of land grabs in Ethiopia show most of the agricultural investors are Indian, including Karuturi, which produces rice, palm oil, maize and sugarcane on 100,000 hectares in the Gambella region, and Emami, a biotech company that grows jatropha and edible oil seeds on 100,000 hectares in Oromia.

"Anecdotal evidence suggests that Indian investors have been as disrespectful of people's rights as the

Chinese, who have gotten most of the attention," Khare said. "What makes India different is that it calls itself a democracy that guarantees human rights. In becoming part of this global land grab, they are acting against their values. Sadly, they are repeating a pattern that is all too familiar within India as well."

### **Resource Takeover Breeds Conflict Across the Country**

RRI and SPWD examined recent land acquisitions, court cases and news reports to reveal that an increase in protests against land grabs in India is emerging as one of the country's most pressing development challenges. Based on news reports and court cases, the map reveals that every state—and every tribal area—in the country is embroiled in these land disputes, many of which are still unresolved.

"We have seen projects such as phosphate mines in Jaisamand, highway projects in Rajasthan and biofuel plantations in Chhattisgarh, and they all share a need for more and more land," said Viren Lobo, the executive director of the Society for Promotion of Wastelands Development. "Such projects continue to claim two percent of the country's common lands each year, ensuring they will face greater civil unrest across the country if the government doesn't recognize the land rights of rural and tribal people."

The map recorded a large number of conflicts across the country, most of which took place in 2011 and 2012; it identified such conflicts in 130 of India's 602 districts.

"The map clearly shows that there are similar conflicts underway in nearly every one of the country's tribal and forest districts," said Madhu Sarin, a Rights and Resources Initiative fellow. "What it does not show, however, are the many, many conflicts that go unreported. The potential for conflict is everywhere. It would be very surprising if there was a single large project underway in the country today that did not involve some takeover of community or forest and common lands."

### **Indian and International Experts Agree on Way**

### **Forward**

Brazilian forestry expert Luiz Joels, one of the experts speaking at the conference, said, "Once the 1988 constitution of Brazil recognized that lands traditionally occupied by indigenous peoples are essential to the preservation of environmental resources and necessary to their well-being, culture and traditions, the situation changed completely. The rights of indigenous peoples have now been recognized and demarcated in over 100 million hectares of territories."

Professor Xu Jintao, an economist at Peking University who is also participating in the event, added a Chinese perspective. "China's economic progress is fundamentally based on agrarian reforms of late 1970s and forest tenure reforms in early 21st century—both of them recognizing rights of people over their resources," he said.

Indian experts participating in the conference agreed; most of these issues do not feature in current deliberations over land conflicts. "What is required is to recognize and record rights, penalize violators of rights, and finally ensure democratic control over decision-making on land takeover," said Shankar Gopalakrishnan.

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