

Assam Tribune, Guwahati, Sunday 9 May 2010

Politicians behind Orang encroachment
Staff Reporter

GUWAHATI, May 8 – Bizarre facts have come to light that reveal how vested political interests have joined hands with illegal settlers and encouraged them to encroach on land, including sensitive Protected Areas that enjoy strict monitoring. The latest incident in which scores of people entered Orang National Park and built up shelters within a span of few hours has demonstrated how well-planned and motivated the entire operation was.

It was timely action by forest department personnel, assisted by the police and the army that finally evicted the encroachers who were armed and willing to confront the government personnel on May 6.

Nearly 1,000 people, natives of river islands, had entered the South-western part of the national park, which is the only major refuge of the Indian rhino north of the Brahmaputra. The status of their citizenship, according to sources, was very doubtful.

Sources, on condition of anonymity, told The Assam Tribune that even while they were being pushed out of the national park, the offenders were issuing threats and made reference to a particular political leader of the Congress party.

“They were quite open about their intentions...and mentioned the name of the leader, who they said was supporting their cause,” said a source present when the confrontation had taken place.

This newspaper was also informed that there was a sinister modus operandi to the effort to grab vast tracts of land. The encroachers had lined up women and children on the front when they faced forest personnel and government officials, indicating that they were trained for such a situation beforehand. Such a move made their eviction particularly difficult.

Although the forest department has stuck to its position, and earned kudos from various quarters, its officials believe that a similar situation might recur in the near future. Already some political leaders have started calling forest officials to show restraint when it comes to dealing with illegal settlers of doubtful citizenship.

According to a senior forest department official, the people who made the abortive bid certainly enjoyed political patronage from high levels. “Otherwise, how would anyone dare to enter a highly protected area and expect to settle permanently?” he asked and added that it was time that the Government realised its responsibility in managing precious natural landscapes.

Meanwhile, monitoring inside the park has been heightened with additional manpower being pressed into service as the authorities do not want a repeat of the ugly episode.