

To,

Shri Jairam Ramesh  
Hon'ble Minister of State (Independent Charge)  
Ministry of Environment and Forests  
Paryavaran Bhavan  
New Delhi

Sub: Appeal for interventions into management of the Similipal Tiger Reserve

Sir,

We are a proactive nature and wildlife conservation group associated in the conservation efforts in Similipal forests in Orissa. It is to state that the extremist onslaught on the Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR) in Orissa last year, has raised a lot of problems for its administration. With its devastated infrastructure and enhanced insecurity atmosphere, the institutional capacity of the STR to protect and enforce the provisions of our wildlife related statues had taken a beating.

However of late, due to some dedicated efforts by the park administration has resulted in improvements in staffing/presence inside the STR, from a stage last year when the whole park was devoid of any staff/personnel for many months. The period after the March-April 2009 attacks saw poachers and timber smugglers having a field day in the reserve.

Similipal has always been facing the brunt of large scale poaching, sometimes referred to as 'akhand shikar'. This sort of ritualistic hunting is aimed at ungulates and other small animals and birds that are meant for local consumption and has been tradition in practice for most of the Central Indian tribes. These poachers are known to enter the reserve in bands numbering as high as 300 and attack anything that moves with arrows, crude guns, etc. We have gathered that over the past few years they have adopted a far more lethal means of poaching i.e. poisoning. Exploiting the weakness of ungulates towards salt, poachers have been creating artificial saltlicks- shallow beds dug into the earth and filled with salt, rice gruel, etc- and are lacing them with pesticides. Ungulates find this concoction irresistible and fall victim. Unfortunately, elephants too are succumbing. In such cases, if the poacher happens to chance upon the elephant, he usually makes off with the tusks, however miserably sized they may be. Sometimes, especially when patrolling is very lax, the poachers are known to make hides near the elephant carcass to shoot wild boar that turn up to scavenge on the carcass. The elephants that have died in Similipal this year appear to be victims to this sort of poaching. The large proportion of females and calves among the victims suggests that they are victims of such indiscriminate poisoning and most probably not that of organised commercial ivory poaching.

It is to state that there have been efforts both from the governmental and non-governmental sectors to counter 'akhand shikar' during the past years, but somehow success has been eluding.

After considering the present context of the STR, the following issues are being highlighted for priority actions at your end:

- 1. Inappropriate Administrative set-up:** As per the Guidelines of the Project Tiger, now National Tiger Conservation Authority, the jurisdiction of the buffer areas of the tiger reserves are to be vested with the Field Director. In the case of the STR, as late as last year the Karanjia, Rairangpur and Baripada Forest Division were reporting to the Field Director STR. This enabled the park administration to provide appropriate focus on the whole tiger reserve. However this has undergone a change with these divisions now reporting to the recently created Regional Chief Conservator of Forests (RCCF) at Baripada in Mayurbhanj. It has been gathered that in view of the division of work in the Orissa Forest Department

between the PCCF (General) and the PCCF (Wildlife), the line hierarchy now being practiced in the case of the STR is highly detrimental to tiger conservation.

**2. Inadequate resources:**

- a. **Manpower:** The STR suffers from a chronic staff shortage. Close to 50 per cent of field staff posts, including forest guards and foresters remain vacant. A lot of the forest guards and foresters are close to retirement age after having put in over three decades of service in the reserve without a single promotion. This is scenario is disastrous for a tiger reserve like Similipal (2750 sq kms), especially considering that this staff is expected to take on armed gangs of poachers numbering in the hundreds on a frequent basis.
- b. **Finances:** It has been gathered that the reserve does not receive adequate funds and funds allocated do not reach the STR administration on time.
- c. **Infrastructure:** The March-April 2009 attacks have caused considerable damage to the park's infrastructure. Staff is being forced to make do with semi-repaired housing in the absence of basic facilities and sanitation.

**3. Low staff morale:** The morale of the reserve's frontline staff suffered during the armed attacks in 2009. After being physically abused, looted and threatened with murder last year they had abandoned their posts. It was after many months of dedicated efforts by the park administration that they returned to their posts and taken charge despite a police advisory warning against such a move. The physically and mentally agonising conditions under which they are made to live and are expected to serve their duties in the remote posts of STR get further aggravated by delayed salaries and lack of promotions. Several of these staffers have served their entire careers- upto 35 years in many cases- in this reserve and haven't received a single promotion. To address this there is a vital necessity to incentivise postings within the tiger reserve's remote stations. Additional financial allowances, medical support, food and rations support, communications support, etc must be provided to staff serving in STR. Staff security also needs to be looked into under the current circumstances.

**4. Reserve and staff security:** To address the need of securing the reserve from mass poaching and extremism and to secure conditions for the staff to work, it is important that the state government expedites the creation of the Special Tiger Protection Force with funds available with the NTCA. In the time it takes to prepare the force, the state must deploy a paramilitary force around the reserve.

**5. Expediting voluntary relocations:** The district and park administration has exhibited tremendous competence in the manner in which it managed to carry out the smooth relocation of the largest village viz. Jenabil from inside the 'core' of the STR. This had been pending since the past three decades. It has been learnt two of the three remaining villages have also voluntarily agreed to relocate. The relocation of the remaining three villages must be expedited by the state by facilitating all necessities required. It is to be mentioned this was the first instance of any relocation having been carried in the state of Orissa for wildlife conservation.

**6. Interdepartmental coordination:** The mass poaching and breakdown of the law and order situation in the reserve calls for enhanced coordination between the police, revenue and the forest departments.

**7. Poaching:** Reports suggested that large congregations of local poachers had a free run immediately after the attacks. Inadequate intelligence gathering has been the root cause in the past too. Unless checked it will wipe out the prey base and ensure the disappearance of the tiger in Similipal.

**8. Encroachment and grazing:** Encroachment by villagers, illegal livestock grazing, illegal felling and other such actions resulting from law and order failure need to be arrested by strengthening the park administration, boosting its administrative and magistrial powers,

9. **‘Similipal Appraisal Report’:** Following the March-April 2009 attacks on Similipal, the NTCA had sent a team of experts led by Dr Bivash Pandav to appraise it about the ground situation in the reserve. The team compiled a very exhaustive report and listed very constructive recommendations. However, the state is yet to enact these and there has been little follow up in this matter both from the state and the centre.
10. **Buffer devoid of wildlife:** The buffer zone of the reserve has over the past decades deteriorated tremendously, including in the quality of vegetative cover and wildlife occupation. This is purely because of poor management of the buffer (administered by three Territorial Divisions of the Forest Department viz. Baripada, Rairangpur and Karanjia) from the wildlife conservation perspective. Stringent protection measures need to be put in place and these divisions should ideally be converted into Wildlife Divisions and placed under the charge of the Field Director STR.

The Similipal Tiger Reserve needs to be revived back to its former glory. It is one of the largest and richest tracts of tiger habitat anywhere in the world and has the potential to sustain one of the single largest tiger and elephant populations in India. It is requested to intervene in this matter and issue necessary instructions on the issues stated above.

Yours faithfully,

(ADITYA CHANDRA PANDA)  
Program Head  
Similipal Conservation Program  
**Wild Orissa**

Copy submitted for information and necessary action:-

1. Chief Minister Orissa, Bhubaneswar
2. Secretary, Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India, Delhi
3. Chief Secretary, Government of Orissa, Bhubaneswar
4. Director General of Forests Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India, Delhi
5. Additional Director General, Wildlife Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India, Delhi
6. Member Secretary National Tiger Conservation Authority Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India, Delhi
7. Director General of Police Orissa, Cuttack
8. Secretary, Department of Forests Government of Orissa, Bhubaneswar
9. Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (General), Orissa, Bhubaneswar
10. Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), Orissa, Bhubaneswar

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