

Tensions Rise in Sonapur Over Proposed Land Handover to Air Force



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A massive protest erupted today in Sonapur, near Guwahati, as thousands of tribal people gathered to oppose the proposed transfer of vast tracts of land to the Indian Air Force. The demonstration, held at the Sonapur Mini Stadium on Friday, March 28, saw local tribal communities voicing their outrage against what they perceive as an encroachment on their ancestral lands, with slogans such as "We will give our blood, not our land" and "Down with Digaru Air Force" resonating through the air.

The unrest stems from the state government's alleged plan to hand over a significant portion of land in Digaru, close to Sonapur, to the Air Force. This move has sparked widespread anger among the tribal population, who claim that their rights to land and livelihood are being systematically undermined. The situation escalated further when the Air Force issued a notice directing the cessation of all construction activities within 900 meters of its base in Digaru, intensifying the already simmering discontent.

In a powerful show of resistance, protesters shut down all shops and markets in Sonapur, wielding banners and posters while chanting slogans against the Air Force's perceived overreach. The tribal communities accused the authorities of disregarding their concerns despite repeated protests across Assam, where large swathes of land—such as 9,000 bighas in Dima Hasao, 18,000 bighas in Karbi Anglong for a solar project, and 1,000 bighas in Palasbari—have allegedly been handed over to corporate entities and government projects, all at the expense of indigenous populations.

Local residents alleged that the Air Force has been misusing its authority, intimidating people who have lived in the area for 60-70 years by halting their construction activities. They further claimed that the Dimoria Sub-District Commissioner has been pressured into issuing eviction notices, exacerbating tensions. In response, the protesters demanded the relocation of the Air Force base and the restoration of their land rights, vowing not to cede their territory under any circumstances.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has faced criticism for what protesters describe as a contradictory stance—publicly advocating for tribal rights while overseeing policies that they argue favor corporate and military interests over indigenous communities. The opposition Congress party and media personnel have also reportedly faced legal repercussions under tribal-related laws, adding fuel to the controversy.

Today's gathering saw the formation of a 40-member committee, led by Hemanta Kalita as president and Diganta Lahkar as secretary, to spearhead the movement. The assembly resolved to escalate their fight by approaching the Gauhati High Court against the Air Force's actions. Additionally, they announced plans to burn an effigy of Digaru Air Force Commanding Officer Ajay Rana on April 3 and issued a 15-day ultimatum for Air Force personnel to vacate rented homes in Sonapur. The protesters also decided to boycott selling vegetables, fruits, fish, and meat to Air Force personnel in local markets.

The tribal communities warned that failure to revoke the construction ban and address their demands within 10 days—including the removal of barricades and checkpoints—could lead to a volatile situation. They accused the Air Force of abandoning earlier promises of local employment, instead adopting policies that threaten the livelihoods of villages like Sonapur, Boruwabari, Ural, Erabari, Borkhat, Milanpur, Jyotinagar, Rupnagar, Shantinagar, Kushal Nagar, Bargharia, Mahmara, Baligate, Damara Pathar, Baliyasthan, Mairakuchi, Rajiv Gandhinagar, Batakuchi, Digaru, Senimur, and Bajram.

Representatives from various organizations, including the All Assam Students' Union, Assam Tribal Mahasangha, All Tiwa Students' Union, Karbi Students' Union, and others, attended the meeting, pledging solidarity with the cause. The protesters cited violations of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1886, and the protection of tribal belts, asserting that their land, water, and air are being polluted daily by such projects.

Ratneshwar Ranghang, president of the Dimoria Citizens' Safety Committee, criticized the government for prioritizing security establishments like the SSB, ITBP, NIA, and Air Force over tribal welfare. "We are not against development," he said, "but why can't the government bring projects like fisheries, agricultural research centers, universities, or museums that benefit our people instead of imposing threats on us?"

As the standoff continues, the people of Sonapur remain resolute, vowing to protect their land and way of life at all costs.

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