

## ZERO HOUR MENTION

The destruction of the ecological sensitive Western Ghats through Encroachments and deliberate flouting of Environment laws and Court Directives : Request to Environment Ministry, GOI to urgently intervene

April 05, 2017

Sir,

I would like to bring to the attention of the house – the serious and wanton destruction of the Ecologically Sensitive Western Ghat region, in particular to forest lands in Munnar.

This area is being destroyed through a rampant culture of encroachment and lack of law enforcement – being done in active collusion with local political leaders and elements of the State Government.

This represents a serious threat to the ecological protection of Western Ghats, in 4 states namely Kerala, Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Goa. Munnar is one of the most famous hill stations in Western Ghats, located at 1800 m above MSL in idukki District of Kerala. Munnar as the name indicates is the origin of 3 rivers. Munnar and adjoining areas like Cardamom Hill Reserve are identified as Eco-Sensitive Zone. This area is facing massive land encroachment and illegal constructions by influential persons supported by the local politicians including that of the people's representatives of ruling front in the state.

The legal status of the Munnar and Cardamom Hill Reserve (about 86,000 hectares) is forest, as identified by the Special Committee constituted by the Hon'ble Supreme Court. There are 3 National Parks within this area. Outside the national parks, the land is still managed by State Revenue Department. Cardamom Hill Reserve accounts for about 70% of the cardamom production of the country. This area is identified as one of the biodiversity hotspots in Western Ghats.

Pallivasal, Kannan Devan Hill (KDH) and Chinnakanal are the 3 villages in which the massive illegal constructions and encroachments are at its peak. The pristine government lands are being encroached by individuals and obtaining assignment certificates from local revenue authorities. In 1993, the Central Govt has given permission for the assignments of some forest lands but even after the same, more

forest lands are being encroached and such encroachments are being regularized without prior permission from the Central Government.

As we all know, any Construction of commercial buildings / resorts within forest lands without prior permission from the Central Government is illegal. Now, there are more than 400 resorts constructed in and around Munnar, causing irreparable harm to the sensitive region.

Even though the revenue officials issued stop memo to all the constructions, it is being completed with the help of local political leaders, in both ruling and opposition front.

Sir, the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) appointed by the Hon'ble Supreme Court has visited Munnar and reported in 2005 that there are hundreds of forged patta (assignment) to encroach forest lands. It is also reported by the CEC that the list of encroachers includes the then Member of Parliament, relatives of ministers and political leaders. In 2010, the Central Government has constituted a Special Team to examine the violations of Forest (Conservation) Act in Munnar. The report of the MOEF team recommended for the strict implementation of Forest Conservation Act in Munnar. Most of the recommendations of the said report were not implemented, till date. Instead, the encroachments have been doubled after 2010, with the help of state machinery.

Sir, the National Green Tribunal has taken the matter into consideration in 2015 and issued strict directions to the Kerala State to curb the encroachments, restore the areas and not to supply electricity connection for illegal constructions. Even the present state government is also helping the encroachers, especially of the local CPIM leaders to violate the court order. **The Central Government may kindly look into the violation of the order of Green Tribunal in O.A No.462 of 2013(SZ).**

Sir, I will speak on some recent facts. The present Devikolam sub-collector Dr.Sriram Venkitaraman is on his one man mission against the illegal constructions and encroachers. Within last 6 months, he has issued stop memo for about 100 illegal constructions. His actions were recently upheld and appreciated by the High Court of Kerala. The sub-collector has close down illegal quarry mining units that destroyed the forest areas, which is the main source of illegal income of some political leaders. CPI(M) in the leadership of Munnar MLA and State Electricity Minister has declared open fight against the sub-collector. On March 7<sup>th</sup>, they have started agitation in front of Sub-collector's office. In fact, the land possessed by Munnar MLA is also in the list of encroachment that obtained bogus assignment. Idukki MP is also facing allegations against the illegal possession of forest lands

assigned to local tribes. Then the Chief Minister of Kerala, has convened a meeting and declared open support to the encroachments of his party leaders.

Sir, last month the State Land Revenue Commissioner has given report to the Government that it has become impossible for revenue officials to examine bogus records as they are facing life threat from local politicians. Report also states that the ecological restoration of Munnar is hopelessly barred by these political interferences. This report has to be viewed seriously. It seems the rule of law itself is in peril in Kerala

Sir, as a country, we are trying our level best to achieve the global mission to reduce carbon emission by conserving our forests. The silent attitude of the State of Kerala against the forest land encroachments has to be seriously addressed by the Central Government, especially in a global warming era. Any land use in violation of the Central Act (FC) is to be viewed seriously. The recommendations of the Central Empowered Committee on CHR in and Central Team report on Munnar has to be implemented in its letter and spirit, to conserve the remaining ecology of Munnar. All encroachments and illegal constructions in Munnar, Pallivasal and CHR should be evicted in a time bounded manner, under FC Act. Any construction in landslide prone High Hazard areas should be dismantled with immediate effect. I request the government to conduct an enquiry about the failure of State of Kerala to implement forest conservation act in Munnar and adjoining areas in Western Ghats.

Sir, Strict action shall be taken against the violators of FC Act in Munnar and CHR. It would be great if a sustainable Tourism master plan is brought for Munnar for protecting the responsible tourism industry also. Giving national importance, the Munnar and Cardamom Hill Reserve must be protected as eco-sensitive Zone, by defeating the petty local political interests.

Please watch the speech <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjaOc0IMvj8>