

Govt inaction, terror led to tribal fury

By N Sriranganath

HYDERABAD, July 4.

The inevitable has happened. The death of a non-tribal farmer in the clash between the tribal and non-tribal peasants in P Rajavaram village of Jeelugumilli mandal in West Godavari district seemed to have provided enough excuse to the government to unleash a reign of terror on the tribals.

When the vexed problem of determining the ownership of thousands of hectares of land in the possession of non-tribals in the scheduled area was crying for a solution, the government allowed the situation to deteriorate by its total inaction or half-hearted action.

When eviction of non-tribals from 1,900 hectares of land in Suvarnavarigudem was ordered, the government took no action even for three years to enable the non-tribals to get a stay order from the high court, which they got in 1993.

The settlement court at Kovvur could dispose of till February 1997, only 42 of about 170 cases involving 1,565 hectares. Of the 42 cases 27 went in favour of non-tribals, 11 in favour of the government while four cases were dropped. But not a single case went in favour of tribals. "Sakthi", a non-governmental organisation working for the protection of tribals' rights, alleged that neither the

tribals nor the petitioner was given notices before disposal of these cases.

In the three notified mandals of West Godavari, all the 29 villages in Jeelugumilli mandal, all the 53 villages in Buttayagudem mandal and 19 of the 23 villages in Polavaram mandal are notified villages. Tribals were granted 7,756 pattas covering 9,391 hectares of land, while non-tribals were granted 43 pattas covering 743 hectares. But the fact is that 28,367 hectares of land assessed waste, poramboke and tribal is under the occupation of non-tribals.

The very presence of non-tribals owing land in the scheduled area it-

self is proof of the systematic violation of the regulations made from time to time governing land transfer in the tribal areas. Yet the government ordered an extensive survey of the disputed lands.

The make-believe survey and the scrutiny of records of the claimants was done amidst prohibitory orders under section 144 with the ulterior motive of discouraging the tribals from asserting their rights. Some time in March the tribals were tricked by the mandal revenue officer of Jeelugumilli into appearing before him for verification of records and when the tribals gathered at one place the police en-

tered the scene and arrested 30 tribals for violating the "prohibitory" orders. The MRO had vanished from the scene minutes before the police entered.

This is just one example of how the revenue officials made a mockery of the decisions taken at higher level of the administration. It also shows to what length the officials could go in the service of the powerful non-tribal landlord lobby.

Earlier, when the non-tribals burnt down the Jeelugumilli MRO's office along with the land records and damaged Jangareddigudem MRO's office, tribals were booked under non-bail-

able sections, the non-tribals were let out on bail.

While allowing the problem to simmer, the authorities should have known that it would flare up during the kharif transplantation in July. The non-tribal lobby, patronised by powerful caste leaders of the ruling party, seemed to be preparing for a showdown, when they had successfully blocked T Krishna Prasad, known for his service to tribals of Visakhapatnam district, from taking over charge as Superintendent of Police, West Godavari.

While the police are turning the agency area upside down, the non-tribal lobby is thirsting for a revenge, according to informed sources. The district collector has imposed a ban on carrying of bows and arrows, which even Rutherford (the British collector during Sitarama Raju's revolt) did not as they were the means of food-gathering by the tribals.

The police swarming the tribal villages have been behaving like an occupation force, caring for none and sparing nothing. The way the news team of Andhra Pradesh Times was threatened by the police when they were collecting information and taking photographs in Jeelugumilli, at a time Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu was promising legislation on "right to information" confirms that the police are a law unto themselves.

Implement Act on war-footing

From P V Kondal Rao

WARANGAL: "The crackdown on tribals in Jelugumilli is prejudiced and motivated, perpetrated by a section of 'collaborators'," was the reaction of Dr B Janardhan Rao, convener of the Adivasi Sangheebhava Committee.

He told AP Times this evening that the incidents were the result of the landgrabbing spree by 'settler-landlords' and ineffective land reforms in the Agency areas.

From Bosarajupally to Panduvarigudem to Palacharla

Rajawaram the theme is the same — a conflict between alienated and exploited tribals and the vested interests representing the government and the plainmen.

According to Sangheebhava Committee findings, in all the three mandals 10,000 acres each are owned by 100 to 220 non-tribal landlords.

Taking exception to tribals being termed as violent, Dr Rao said the landlords created lawlessness violating several rules including the land transfer Regulation One of 1970.

"Unfortunately the government

itself was the law-breaker, being a silent spectator to the process of official transfer of fertile forest lands in East Godavari, where after 1977 about 39,000 hectares of land in 531 cases were given as 'booty' to non-tribal absentee landlords," he said.

On the banning of arrows and bows, Dr Rao said "the tribals will continue to use them even if a ban is imposed."

Dr Rao suggested strict implementation of the Regulation One to solve the land dispute. He sought the finalisation of land disputes within a stipulated time by high court judges and other experts involved in the issue.