India must Halt Mass Eviction during COVID-19

TRT world

The Indian state has been a cauldron of ethnic tensions for decades and the latest round of forced expulsions of hundreds of Muslims is only making the matters worse.

ASSAM -- On September 24, dawn broke to an eerie silence in the riverine char villages of Dhalpur 1 and 3 deep inside Assam’s Darrang district, a lush green hinterland in the northeastern part of India. On the days prior, the shifting sands in the river island had soaked in the tears and blood of 800 families - Muslims of Bengal origin - displaced from their tin roofs and walls in a forced eviction drive carried out on September 20 and 23. The residents say they received the eviction notice only the night before it began.

Panic and chaos ensued as residents were forcibly driven out of their homes, shortly after which the excavators razed them to the ground. By the second instance, the evictors - Assam Police and district administration - persisted with more aggression burning down homes this time around. The authorities say the land these families were displaced from belonged to the government.

On the day before reporters descended, the evicted locals along with close neighbours (fearing they might be next in line) gathered in a human chain to protest the forceful eviction drive. Residents said that their representatives were in discussion with the district administration to negotiate a proper relocation site for them apart from the 1000 bighas (133 hectares) that had been allotted close by.

What followed next was a gruesome display of State firepower along with a heavy cocktail of ethnic and communal contempt.

"He knew he was going to die"

In a video that went viral on Thursday evening, thirty-three-year-old Moinul Haque is seen chasing police constables and a photographer wielding a cane to the reception of police forces, who gunned him down with bullets and dealt heavy baton blows to his body. Whilst still warm, the photographer - a Bijoy Bania employed by the district administration who has since been arrested - trampled on Haque’s body that lay deathly still.

At least eight people were heavily injured in police firing that the residents alleged commenced without any warning, either blank shots in the air or the use of lighter force like baton charge. Three cops were also injured in the mayhem and they are all being treated in the Guwahati Medical College and Hospital.

The locals said that many family members were still missing but no one had any clue or account of just how many and where they may have been lost. Twelve-year-old Sheikh Farid, who was caught in the milieu of the day’s mayhem, shortly after he collected his Aadhaar (biometric identification) card from the local post office, fell dead to live bullets.

All the residents we spoke to said their names were in the NRC, ready to produce their documents whether voter lists, Aadhaar or even land tax records that a few were in possession of. Their voices quivered as they recalled the events of the previous day, eventually turning into a soft then loud wail.

“Another team of police came out of nowhere when the deputy commissioner said the eviction will go ahead at any cost, which is when I heard the sound of gunshots,” said Ahmed Ali, who broke down in tears saying his child went missing the day before. “I went looking for my kid along with my brother, who was shot with a rubber bullet on the side of his torso".

Ali said that the police set fire to a table in which he had kept 26,000 INR and 800 kilograms of jute stored inside his house. “I’ve lost everything. How will poor people like us survive? Is this happening because we’re Muslims? Even our mosques and Qurans were not spared”.

The Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party government in the state are calling these residents ‘illegal encroachers’ occupying 4500 bighas (602 hectares) of land that would be now repurposed as agricultural land for the older Assamese (Hindu and Muslim) residents living nearby. Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma tweeted earlier last week that he was ‘happy’ the way the district administration had cleared the land of 800 households along with four ‘illegal religious structures’ and a private institution. He defended the police firing saying thousands had attacked the forces

The day Haque and Farid were brutally killed transforming the farmland into a killing field, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his address at the United Nations General Assembly said that those using extremism as a political tool with regressive thinking must understand that terrorism is equally a threat to them. He was alluding to the self-elected Taliban rulers in Afghanistan.

Assam CM Sarma posted the video in a tweet saying, “PM Shri @narendramodi ji takes a strong stand against state-sponsored terrorism that has paralysed several nations across the globe #PMModiAtUNGA”.

“The police and CRP (army) were already firing shots at Haque and the other residents,” said Mohammad Ibramul, a resident we met outside Haque’s family's new makeshift home. Enraged by the high handedness of the police, Ibramul said that his neighbour didn’t care for a reason anymore when he charged at them with a mere cane in hand.

“He knew he was going to die”.

[Original source](https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/how-a-forceful-eviction-in-india-s-assam-state-turned-bloodied-50275)

Two killed in Police Firing at Assam Eviction Site

Times of India

GUWAHATI: Two persons were killed and at least nine policemen sustained injuries when a large mob clashed with police while they were trying to evict encroachers from a vast swathe of government land in the Dholpur area of Assam’s Darrang district on Thursday.

The dead have been identified as Saddam Hussain and Sheikh Farid. An assistant sub-inspector is admitted to the Gauhati Medical College Hospital in a critical condition.

Police initially fired in the air and burst teargas shells to disperse the protesters but as the crowd refused to dissipitate and started attacking the men in uniform, police had to resort to firing.

“The police were given a task to evict the encroachers and they were carrying out their work when they were attacked by people with stones and sharp weapons. There was firing from the police. The eviction drive will continue,” Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma said.

The area covering about 7000 bigha of government land has been allotted for a farming project by the state cabinet and last Monday the district administration had evicted 800 households in the first phase of eviction Monday without any trouble on Monday. Thursday’s drive was meant to evict the remaining 500 households who were served notices on Wednesday.

Villagers said they had gathered to demand rehabilitation of nearly 800 families evicted from the land they were living on for decades on Monday.

Among the video clippings of the incident doing the rounds, one of them showed a photographer accompanying the police being chased by a villager carrying a sharp weapon. When the police stopped the protester and took him down on the ground, the photographer jumped on the protester’s chest several times and punched him brutally. Assam Police special DG GP Singh said the cameraman has been arrested.

The state government has ordered an inquiry into the circumstances leading to the death of the two civilians and injury of several others, including police personnel, in the incident by a retired judge of the Gauhati high court.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has called the police action “state-sponsored fire”. He tweeted, “Assam is on state-sponsored fire. I stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the state - no children of India deserve this.” Assam Pradesh Congress president Bhupen Kumar Borah said, “The very act of eviction is in itself inhuman, especially during the Covid situation.”

AIUDF general secretary Aminul Islam said, “The CM is in charge of the home department and today’s act was like that of General Dyer. We cannot accept it. It shows that the CM was taking a sadistic pleasure out of it and he has not shown any sympathy for these people.”

The Gauhati high court, on May 10, had kept in abeyance any decree for eviction or dispossession or demolition which was passed by any court, tribunal or authority in view of the pandemic but vacated the order in August on grounds that the Covid situation in the state has improved.

Assam additional advocate general PN Goswami said, “The high court order on May 10 in a suo moto PIL deals with a ‘decree’ by a court, tribunal or authority and execution thereof. According to me, eviction of illegal encroachers from government land or inside a reserve forest does not warrant any ‘decree’ from any court or tribunal or authority. Moreover, even such an interim order was vacated by the Hon’ble high court vide order dated August 13. As such, presently the Government is at liberty to evict all illegal encroachers from government as well as forest land.”

The BJP government has taken up a series of drives across the state to evict encroachers occupying land belonging to Vasihnavite satras, ancient temples and the government.

[Original source](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/two-die-as-assam-cops-fire-on-land-encroachers-in-darrang/articleshow/86466135.cms)

In Assam Govt Drive against ‘Illegal Encroachments’, 800 Families Evicted in Darrang

by Tora Agarwala

Monday’s drive has drawn criticism from Opposition parties as well as human rights activists for evicting people without a proper rehabilitation plan.

At least 800 families, occupying about 4,500 bighas of land, in Assam’s Darrang district were evicted as part of the state government’s drive against “illegal encroachments” on Monday.

Following the drive, Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma tweeted: “Continuing our drive against illegal encroachments, I am happy and compliment district administration of Darrang and @assampolice for having cleared about 4500 bigha, by evicting 800 households, demolishing 4 illegal religious structures and a private instn at Sipajhar, Darrang.”

He added that he had inspected such riverine areas “encroached by illegal settlers near Dholpur Shiva Mandir” in June. “I had assured temple mgmt & local people to set up a Manikut, build a guest house & boundary wall. Today’s eviction is aimed at starting community farming by removing encroachment,” he wrote.

Darrang SP Sushanta Biswa Sarma told Indianexpress.com that the drive was carried out between 9 am and 4 pm in Dholpur 1 and Dholpur 3 villages in Sipajhar. “They were all encroachers and almost all moved out without resistance,” he said. The two villages are home primarily to Muslims of Bengali origin.

One of the BJP government’s promises before it came to power for a second term in May was to free government lands from “encroachers”, and allot them to “indigenous landless people” of the state. Similar drives evicted 70 families in Hojai’s Lanka and 25 families in Sonitpur’s Jamugurihat in June.

In Sipajhar, where the eviction took place on Monday, the government plans to implement its multi-crore ‘Garukhuti Project’ (part of the state budget 2021-22), where the freed up land will be used for afforestation and agriculture activities, involving indigenous youth.

Monday’s drive has drawn criticism from Opposition parties as well as human rights activists for evicting people without a proper rehabilitation plan. Locals in the area have alleged that the government has not helped the families in any way, who now have moved to nearby areas along the river. “The administration is telling them to move from there too. But where will they go?” asked Saddam Hussen, a social activist from Sipajhar, who was at the spot. “Since last night, there has been rain and fierce winds… small children, women are huddled together in the midst of all this. Some got the eviction notices the night before, some on the day of the drive and some did not get any notice at all,” he alleged.

When asked about the notice, Darrang DC Prabhati Thaosen said that the people had “lots of time”. “The committee to look into the agriculture and development project in the area was constituted in June itself. We got a request from the agriculture department to declare the area as community agricultural land, so they [the people] had lots of time,” she said. She added that the administration would do “whatever they can on humanitarian grounds” and that a medical team and facilities for running water and latrines would be provided to the displaced.

However, locals have alleged that no help has reached them. “There are no medical teams, no running water, no toilets… not even tarpaulin to cover them. This is completely inhuman,” Rejaul Karim, the president of All Assam Minority Students’ Union (AAMSU), who visited the spot earlier on Tuesday, said.

“We are not against the agricultural project – in fact, we had many meetings with the chief minister regarding this and all we had asked for was proper rehabilitation. But this is a human rights violation and targeted against a particular community,” he said.

Congress MP Abdul Khaleque responded to the development by tweeting out his letter to the Gauhati High Court during the June eviction. He wrote: “Considering the Covid-19 pandemic, a full bench of Hon’ble Gauhati High Court headed by the Chief Justice, vide its order dated 10.05.2021, has ordered that any decree for eviction/dispossession or demolition should remain in abeyance.” Adding that the evictions are a violation of Article 21 of the Constitution, he said: “I always oppose eviction without a proper rehabilitation plan. Darrang eviction is inhuman.”

Akhil Gogoi’s Raijor Dal also criticised the eviction drive. In a video statement, party secretary Ashraful Islam said that they were not opposing the agricultural revolution. “But in the name of agricultural revolution, the poor communities which have been living there for generations working in the agriculture sector itself are being evicted. Is this revolution?” he asked.

[Original source](https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/assam/in-assam-govt-drive-against-illegal-encroachments-800-families-evicted-in-darrang-7525004/)