The Government of Manipur, a provincial government of the Government of India has unleashed a

reign of state terror by burning down floating huts (Khangpokshang), built over Phumdis (floating vegetation mass) belonging to the fishermen living in Loktak Wetlands in Central Manipur from November 15, 2011 and is still continuing. The deliberate arsoning process was carried out by personnel of the Loktak Development Authority and the Manipur Police forces in accordance with a government notification issued by Loktak Development Authority on 11 November 2011. Nearly 200 floating huts have already been burnt so far till 17 November and the remaining 1,132 floating huts are to meet similar fate. There are about 5,000 family members living in all these floating huts in localities like Khuman Yangbi, Nambul Machin and Karang Sabal within the Loktak Lake.

The burning down of the floating huts is in accordance with the provisions of the much controversial Loktak Lake (Protection) Act, 2006, in particular Article 19 and 20 of the Act, which divides the 236.21 sq km Loktak Lake into two zones - a core zone comprising 70.30 sq km, which is a ‘no development zone’, or ‘totally protected zone’, and a buffer zone of other areas of the lake excluding the core zone. A vital aspect of this division is the ban on building huts or houses on phumdis inside the lake, planting athaphum, or engaging in athaphum-fishing in the core area, which will adversely affect over 10,000 people living in phumdi huts, as well as others dependent on Loktak Lake.

The arsoning of nearly 200 floating huts has led to displacement of nearly 950 community members so far who has been living in these floating huts for generations. The number of affected community is still increasing as the arsoning spree is continuing. The affected family members including women, children and elderly are seeking refuge at Ningthoukhong Makha Leikai community hall in Bishenpur District, Manipur. The fishing gears and nets of the communities, the only survival means to catch fish from the Loktak wetlands were also burned and these has left the community in further dire situation and will impact on the communities to feely carry out daily chores of livelihood activities which they follow since time immemorial. Many of the children can no longer go to school. With the winter already setting in Manipur, the displaced villagers are facing much inconveniences.

Each household was offered 40,000 Indian Rupees (approx 900 USD) as compensation before burning down their huts. However, most of the villagers rejected this payment as the amount is too meager and cannot compensate their livelihood and survival means. And moreover, there is no process to rehabilitate the affected villagers and their right to free, prior and informed consent has not been sought. Rather, the arsoning of the huts is a forcible process with the Manipur police commandoes threatening and intimidating the affected villagers before burning their huts. And in many cases, the police also forced the displaced family members to burn their own huts.

The arsoning and destruction of floating huts and livelihood of the indigenous people dwelling in Loktak Lake constitute a serious violation of the “right to life”, “right to adequate housing” as guaranteed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and also the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Right. The failure to take the consent of the affected communities also constitute a serious forms of discrimination targetting the marginalized communities and also violated the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination.

Affected peoples in several occasions had been raising vehement opposition to the introduction of the Act, which they fear would break the age-old bond between the lake and its people. Indigenous peoples depending on the Loktak Lake for survival continue to demand complete scrapping of the Loktak Protection Act, 2006.

Urge upon the Government of India to

• Call for immediate suspension of burning of the remaining floating huts at Loktak lake

• Allow and support the affected villagers to rebuild their floating huts in the phumdis for all those whose houses are being burnt and destroyed.

• Adequate resettlement for affected fishermen near the lake with their free prior and informed consent so as to enable them to catch fishes and depend on the Loktak wetlands for their survival.

• Adequate compensation for the loss of properties of affected villagers, such as fishing gears and equipments.

• Revoke the Manipur Loktak Lake Protection Act, 2006 as this act has been formulated without the participation and consent of the affected communities and this act has failed to address the root cause of the persisting and increasing problems of Loktak Lake caused by the Ithai Barrage of the Loktak Multipurpose Hydroelectric Project.

• Review Loktak Multipurpose Project and consider decommissioning of the Ithai Barrage in accordance with the recommendations of the World Commission on Dams

• Recognize indigenous peoples' community rights over their land and resources and their right to define their development priorities using their land and resources.

• Implement indigenous peoples Right to Free Prior and Informed Consent before introducing any mega development policies and projects in Manipur in accordance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

• Stop all forms of displacement of indigenous peoples in the name of protection of wetlands and thereby should not lead to extinguishment of their survival and livelihood.

• State should stop militarization of indigenous peoples land and using the military and law enforcing agencies in the pretext of promoting development projects in their territories without their consent

***More Photos***

***Source :***

*"Fishermen rolls up sleeves to defy Act", the 27 April 2011, The Sangai Express. http://thesangaiexpress.com/fullstory.php?newsid=5340*