Tribal families reoccupy forestland in Wayanad

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Seek compensation for land given up by them

Sixteen families, including 12 tribal families, which left the Kottankara hamlet in June, a settlement inside the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary (WWS), reoccupied the place on Saturday under the aegis of the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary Rehabilitation Action Council. (The council had been seeking compensation for the land abandoned by the tribespeople).

The flaws in implementing the voluntary relocation project of the government left the tribespeople with no choice but to reoccupy the land, council convener S. Shobhankumar said.

Under the project, 40 families had been relocated on June 24. Only 24 of the families got the promised compensation of Rs.10 lakh each, he said.

When the project was announced on April 9, Chief Minister Oommen Chandy had assured the tribespeople that they would get compensation as per the guidelines of the Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitat Scheme in three months. But the Chief Minister could not keep his word, Mr. Shobhankumar said.

The guidelines said male children over 18 years of age; unmarried female children above the age of 18; physically and mentally challenged persons irrespective of their age and sex; minor orphans; and widows or women divorcees would be treated as ‘separate families.’

A survey conducted by the Kerala Forest Research Institute, Peechi, a few years ago had identified 96 eligible families in the hamlet. But many families were excluded from the final list prepared by the Forest Department, Krishnan Kottamkara, 57, a tribal farmer of the hamlet said.

Krishnan Kottamkara was born and brought up in the hamlet and he had 520 acres of leased land there.

The authorities failed to include him on the final list as he was hospitalised following cardiac arrest. Many others who were not present at the hamlet during an inspection by the authorities had also been excluded, Mr. Shobhankumar said.

There were six ‘eligible families’ in his house according to the KFRI list, he added. “When the forest officials prepared the final list, I was undergoing eye surgery in a Coimbatore hospital,” Elias, another resident of the hamlet, said.

He was later included on the list after he could convince the officials about the issue but, was yet to get any compensation, he added.

They had left the hamlet in June expecting that they would get the compensation soon, Mariyil Kuriakose, who had been living outside the forest since, said.

“Hence, we decided to live in our land till we get compensation,” he added. As many as 12 tribesmen had got possession certificates for their land under the Forest Rights Act in 2010.