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Statement - India: Police crackdown and arrest of human rights defenders protesting against corporate mining in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra

Front Line Defenders strongly condemns the [brutal crackdown](#) and arrest of human rights defenders associated with the **Damkondawahi Bachao Sangharsh Samiti** by police authorities in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra. On 20 November 2023, the police initiated a crackdown on a nine-month long peaceful protest against corporate mining in the Etapalli Subdivision of the Gadchiroli District. They beat protestors, seized their mobile phones and belongings, destroyed huts and shelters, and detained a number of protestors including human rights defenders and community leaders. As part of this crackdown, 21 peaceful protestors have been arrested on fabricated charges and remanded to judicial custody. Front Line Defenders express its solidarity with the protest movement and the human rights defenders and community leaders facing persecution as a result of their legitimate and peaceful human rights work.

[The Damkondawahi Bachao Sangharsh Samiti](#) is a protest movement led by Madia-Gond Adivasis — a people recognised by the Indian government as a [Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group](#) (PVTG). The protest movement advocates against corporate mining in the Etapalli Subdivision of the Gadchiroli District. In 2007, Lloyds Metals and Energy Private Limited (LMEL) was given clearance to begin iron ore mining in an area of over 348.09 hectares of land in the village of Surjagarh in Gadchiroli. This decision was taken without any public consultation with the local community, namely the *gram sabhas* (village councils), as is mandated by the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 and the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act 1996. On 10 March 2023, LMEL was granted environmental clearance to expand its excavation from 3 to 10 million metric tonnes per annum. The area being excavated by LMEL for iron ore mining encroaches on lands granted to Adivasis as part of their community forest rights under the Forest Rights Act 2006.

On 11 March 2023, Adivasi communities from over seventy villages, most of whom belong to the Madia-Gond community, came together under the collective Damkondawahi Bachao Sangharsh Samiti to oppose the iron ore mining by LEML, which has posed an existential threat to their lands, livelihood, culture and environment. Despite their ongoing protest, in June 2023, [six new mines](#), spanning 4,684 hectares, were leased to five companies — Omsairam Steels and Alloys Private Limited, JSW Steels Limited, Sunflag Iron and Steel Company Limited, Universal Industrial Equipment and Technical Services Private Limited, and Natural Resources Energy Private Limited. If allowed to operate, these mines could potentially displace at least 40,900 people.

On 20 November 2023, a large police contingent arrived at the protest site in Todgatta and unleashed a violent crackdown on the peaceful protestors. The police singled out the leaders of the protest movement and forcefully searched their belongings. Eight human rights defenders and leaders of the protest, namely Mangesh Naroti, Pradeep Heddo, Sai Kawdo, Gillu Kawdo, Laxman Jetti, Mahadu Kawdo, Nikesh Naroti, and Ganesh Korea, were forcibly taken away by the police in a helicopter and their phones seized. The police also vandalized

small huts and shelters at the protest site. [Videos](#) emerging from the incident reveal the police lathi-charging protestors and reprimanding those who attempted to document police action. Several protestors sustained serious injuries due to police violence.

21 protestors, including human rights defenders and community leaders, are currently imprisoned, accused of various offences including rioting, criminal conspiracy, assaulting a public servant during discharge of their duty, wrongful restraint, and unlawful assembly. It is crucial to note that the First Information Report (FIR) 0074/23 against the human rights defenders was registered on 21 November 2023 which means that the human rights defenders were illegally detained without formal charges for almost an entire day, and their whereabouts were unknown to their family members. Those arrested are currently being held in Chandrapur Jail and have been remanded to judicial custody where they are to be held until 5 December 2023.

The crackdown took place a few weeks after the human rights defender and lawyer Lalsu Nogoti provided [a video statement](#) at the 54th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Commission and spoke about the struggles and demands of Madia-Gond Adivasis and other traditional forest dwelling communities. As a member of the Madia-Gond Adivasi community himself, Lalsu Nogoti has been vocal about the attacks faced by indigenous populations through the colluding forces of corporatization, militarization and state repression. On the day of the attacks, Nogoti and other human rights defenders participated in a public discussion on the issues faced by communities organised by the Forum Against Corporatization and Militarization (FACAM) in New Delhi.

The police [claimed](#) that protestors had disrupted the inauguration of a new police station in Wangeturi village and had violently attacked police officials. They also alleged that the protests are a means to advance Maoist agendas and requested that the arrested human rights defenders be placed in police custody for interrogation. Targeting peaceful indigenous movements on the basis of fabricated Maoist conspiracies is part of a wider trend by Indian authorities which seeks to criminalize these communities and undermine their calls for human rights—a pattern that has also been observed by the Indian Ministry of Tribal Affairs in their [high-level committee report](#).

Front Line Defenders has previously raised concerns over the criminalization and legal persecution of indigenous movements in [Odisha](#), [Madhya Pradesh](#), and [Jharkhand](#). Protest movements such as the Damkondawahi Bachao Sangharsh Samiti embody the struggles of India's Adivasi communities who have been consistently marginalized, persecuted and denied access to their constitutionally guaranteed rights. The Madia-Gond Adivasis are inextricably tied to their lands and forests, which not only serve as their source of livelihood but also encompass their traditional, cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices. Corporate mining in the region has [severely impacted](#) the community's access to their lands and forests. Moreover, the pollution this has given rise to has led to several debilitating health issues within of the community. We urge the authorities in India to cease the targeting of human rights defenders associated with the Damkondawahi Bachao Sangharsh Samiti and to uphold India's commitments to recognise the rights of indigenous populations as per international law.