

To: Shri P.R. Kyndiah
Minister of Tribal Affairs
Government of India, New Delhi

26 June 2007

**Sub: Forest fires, NTFP ban, and Soliga adivasis in Biligiri Rangaswamy Sanctuary,
Karnataka**

Dear Shri Kyndiah,

We would like to draw your attention to recent incidents of forest fires and the ban on forest produce collection in Biligiri Rangaswamy Wildlife Sanctuary, Karnataka, and in particular their implications for the Soliga adivasis and for conservation of biodiversity.

Attached is a report of an investigation we carried out on these incidents, containing our key findings and a series of recommendations for your government's consideration.

In particular, we would like to point to the following urgent needs:

1. Appropriate action relating to Forest Department officials regarding allegations of their mistreatment of the Soliga adivasis;
2. A long-term plan for managing fire, based on scientific and traditional knowledge that is available in the area;
3. Lifting the ban on NTFP collection by the Soligas, and providing other livelihood means;
4. Phasing out the coffee plantations inside the Sanctuary and stopping mining in adjacent areas;
5. Moving towards collaborative management of the Sanctuary, in which the Forest Department, Soliga Sanghas, and local NGOs can play a constructive role in achieving conservation of the area's unique biodiversity as also securing the livelihoods of the Soliga adivasis.

In particular, the role of the central government in this relates to the fact that the ban on NTFP collection has been imposed due to a provision (Section 29) of the Wild Life (Protection) Act (WLPA), which is being interpreted in such a manner as to stop even basic traditional livelihood activities of the Soliga adivasis. **This is causing widespread suffering and impoverishment of the Soligas.** It is vital that the central government intervene urgently to clarify that such activities should not be prohibited under the WLPA.

We would appreciate your response to these recommendations, and offer our assistance in taking forward the various recommendations made in this report.

We have sent our report to the Karnataka government and to the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests also, for appropriate action.

Thank you, sincerely,

(Ashish Kothari)