

Fear of Maoists hits tiger census

Bhubaneswar, May 8: The tiger census in Orissa, which started on Saturday, was hit by the refusal of dozens of forest field staff in various parts of the state to enter forests due to the Maoist threat, a senior state official said.

About 40-45 forest field staffs refused to enter the Sunabeda wildlife sanctuary area in the Nuapada district because they feared a threat to their life, chief wildlife warden P.N. Padhi said. Located on the border of Chhattisgarh state, this wildlife sanctuary, some 616 km from here, sprawls over an area of 600 square km and houses quite a good number of tigers, he said.

The forest field staff's fear has increased since a group of armed rebels last month gunned down a forest guard and ransacked a forest check-post inside this sanctuary.

Similarly, the staff in parts of mineral rich Keonjhar district also did not join the census operation although the reason has not yet been ascertained, he said.

Mr Padhi, however, said the census operation was going on in the rest of the state without any trouble. "There was no report of any trouble from any other part of the state. It was going on smoothly," he said.

The enumeration operation to know the number of big cats in the state will be conducted for three days in state's tiger reserves and it is expected to continue till May 13 in other areas.

The Orissa non-gazetted forest service association - an umbrella body of the

Orissa



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foresters and forest guards — had said that the forest field staff would join the operation only after the government fulfilled their demands, including introduction of group patrolling in place of the age-old beat system in which one or two forest officials are given the charge of a particular forest area.

They had also asked the government to provide forest field staff with weapons and sought parity with the police so far as compensation and incentives for working in Maoist-affected districts is concerned.

"Most of their demands have been looked after and they are conducting the census," Mr Padhi said.

"We are also trying to sort out the problems with those who did not participate," he added.

—IANS/