

Stalled tigress death probe gets a leg-up

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Investigations into the 11-day-old murder mystery of an eight-year-old tigress in the Bandhavgarh reserve in Madhya Pradesh gained momentum on Monday with the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) member-secretary Dr Rajesh Gopal reaching the site to probe the incident and report back to Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh.

The identity of the killer/s continues to be shrouded in mystery. Though Ramesh had sought an immediate report from MP Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, there has been no response so far.

In view of the delay, Dr Gopal

reached the tiger reserve on Monday. There is speculation that a CBI probe may be ordered into the incident.

MP's Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests Dharmendra Shukla, who was earlier probing the incident, said, "The preliminary inquiry report related to circumstances causing the incident and other factors has been submitted to the State, but the criminal investigation is still not over. The report will take some time."

According to NTCA sources, Gopal will also decide on the rehabilitation of the three cubs after the death of their mother. The three-month-old cubs need special attention.

In another development, nearly 200 villagers under the banner of

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Jansabha met outside the reserve on Monday to finalise their three-point memorandum to be submitted to Dr Gopal. They are demanding a CBI inquiry, protection of the orphaned cubs and a stable tourism policy for the benefit of the local villagers who largely depend on this trade.

"We are convinced that the Forest department would not be able to do justice to the investigation as one of the officials is involved," said Dhruv Singh, a local, who spoke to this correspondent over telephone. This, he felt, explains the inordinate delay in the submission of the report, despite the directives of the

Environment Minister, adding that it should be handed over to the CBI now.

The safety of the cubs following the death of the mother was also a source of concern for the local villagers. The three cubs continue to be in the prime natural habitat area, which are inhabited by other tigresses, wolves, leopards etc. The prevailing situation may disturb the equilibrium of the habitat. However, Field Director CR Patil said, "The cubs are safe and being monitored round-the-clock. They are being fed from time to time."

The villagers also threw light on inconsistent tourist policies. The policies change with change in field directors, they said. "They are transferred after every two-three years leaving us at crossroads", they regretted.

The eight-year-old tigress was found dead in Jhurjhura region of the reserve close to a water source in Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve on May 19. The post-mortem report said the big cat died of multiple injuries after she was knocked down more than once by a vehicle.