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## Two tribals killed in police firing

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AT LEAST two persons were killed in police firing on agitating tribals who wanted the release of some girls caught by forest guards while collecting fire wood in Sabarkantha on Wednesday.

Unofficial reports said three tribals were killed. Three were seriously injured in the firing.

The police were said to have fired 25 rounds and burst 20 teargas shells on the tribal group that allegedly held some forest range officials hostage after the arrest of the girls.

Sabarkantha MP Madhusudan Mistry said the police appear to have fired to kill as the injuries on the two dead persons were on the head and chest. Former minister for health and tribal affairs Anil Joshiara, who rushed to Antarsumba, where the incident occurred, said the three injured had been hit in the stomach, neck and head.

The three injured have been brought to the Civil Hospital in Ahmedabad while the bodies of two tribals killed have been brought to Idar in Sabarkantha district.

The area near Vijaynagar in north Gujarat's Sabarkantha district was tense for the last few days over tribal forest rights.

But trouble started on Wednesday morning when the girls were arrested.

This resulted in a skirmish between

the tribals and the forest officials, prompting the State Reserve Police to open fire.

The reserve police contingent was posted in the area near the Polo jungles following clashes in the last few days between the forest officials and the tribals who have reportedly begun venturing into the forest land as they are feel entitled to use its produce according to the new act on tribal forest land rights.

The state government suspects the tribals have been misinformed into believing that the new forest land rights law ensures that any land can be used by them even if they forcibly occupy it.

The state conservator of forests, Anil Johri, said the law sets the cut-off date as December 2005 for entitlement to forest land, not for land

forcibly occupied now. He also said the trouble started when the tribals attacked the range forest office with bows and arrows despite being cautioned against cutting trees in the forest area.

Two rangers were been injured in the attack, Johri said.

However, social scientist and author Achyut Yagnik disputed the government's stand, arguing that the new forest land law also allowed the tribals some community rights, like grazing cattle and collecting minor forest produce. The tribals should be allowed to exercise these rights at least, Yagnik said.

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