

'Army carrying out construction, felling trees in Ridge'

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THE Army has been accused of carrying out illegal construction and felling of trees in a section of the Ridge assigned to it for conducting exercises.

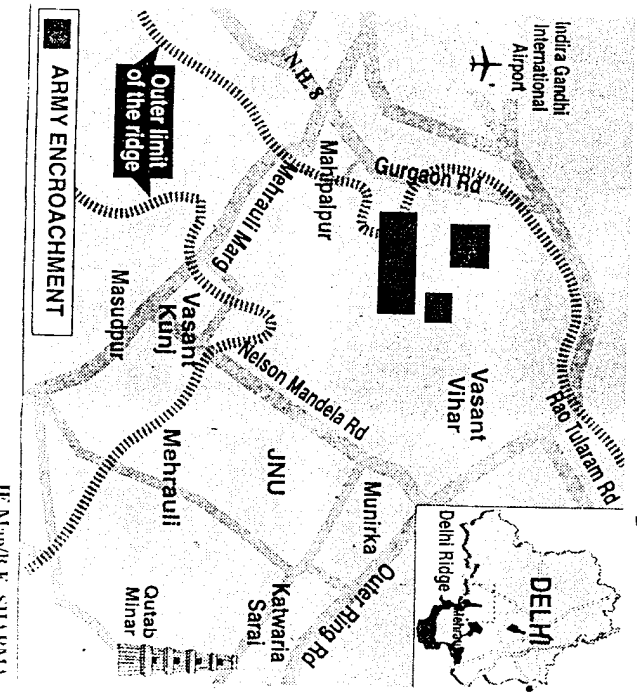
Addressing a press conference called by Citizens for Preservation of the Quarries and Lakes Wilderness (CPQLW), Vikram Soti, an activist, said: "It is an unambiguous fact that this section is part of the Ridge. Construction should be stopped immediately. Cutting of a single tree is not allowed without permission of the forest department."

The area in question is roughly 101 m by 7 km in the south-central Ridge, surrounded by JNU, M-1, and Mahipalpur Road, National Highway Number 8 and the Palam Airport Road. The 1996 masterplan shows it as forest area, which means a total ban on any kind of construction. This section was given to the Army to conduct exercises in the 70s. Construction began last year in September, according to CPQLW.

Ridge-watchers are trying to convince the government and the forest department to notify this particular stretch of the Ridge. The reason why some chunks of the Ridge are still not notified is because the area has not been surveyed properly, according to CPQLW.

Author and senior diplomat Kundip Nayyar, who has espoused the cause of the Ridge, had written a personal letter this April to Defence Minister George Fernandes (on the issue. In his reply, the minis-

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ter had written that after getting the matter examined, it had been made clear that the area was outside the notified area of the Ridge. The construction is for building defence quarters for married officers, he further said.

However, when Nayyar raised the question in Parliament, the Defence Ministry replied that there was no construction and no encroachment.

"I am planning to go to the privilege committee because the answer was misleading," said Nayyar.

Letters have also been despatched to the Ministry of Environment and the Chief Minister, but so far there has been no response.

According to this citizen's group, the section is part of the same Ridge in which all con-

struction had been banned by the Supreme Court judgment of 1996.

The same year, the court had also set up the Environment Impact Assessment Authority. It is only after this Indian committee submitted its report on the Ridge that the Rs 1.5 billion multi-lane project was approved.

This is the second time if Army has figured in a controversy over its role in the Ridge. It was forced to refer a polo ground two years ago after the fact that trees had been felled to clear the area came to light.

The citizens' group said that whenever the government wants to show that it is pro-forest, also can harness other same things in Environment Impact Assessment, where it is apparent that the Army is a

