

# Velsao locals score small win as Railways stop work on disputed land

Tensions flare over ongoing construction work that has trapped villagers and their vehicles within their compounds; District Administration calls for immediate halt to double-tracking work



Team Herald

**MARGAO:** In a victory for Velsao residents, railway authorities on Tuesday backed off from contested land after a confrontation that culminated in intervention from South Goa District Collector Egna Cleetus.

However, locals await a formal written order from her.

Earlier on Tuesday, a large group of people assembled at Primeirovaddo, Velsao, in solidarity with the affected residents, who have found themselves landlocked in their own homes, due to the recent railway construction work that has blocked their traditional right of way.

When the railway workers initially attempted to continue construction work, they were met with strong resistance from the residents who have consistently maintained ownership of the land, citing Portuguese-era title documents.

Former Cortalim MLA Alina Saldanha, Velsao Sarpanch Diana Gouveia, Goencho Ekvott (GE) Secretary Olencio Simoes were also present for the protest while South Goa MP

“Unless there is any specific title given in favour of the Railways by the then Portuguese government, be it nature of a grant or aforamento or in the nature of an award declared under the land acquisition Act 1894, we would not be in a position to say that the land as sought to be certified is of the Railways

– Directorate of Settlement and Land Records in a letter to the Railways, in 2022

Captain Viriato Fernandes along with GE Founder Orville Dourado Rodrigues engaged with the Rail Vikas Nigam Limited (RVNL) officials in the presence of a heavy police force.

At first, the RVNL officials claimed they had had possession of the land for over 100 years, asserting their right to construct the double tracking for SWR.

However, this claim was immediately challenged by the MP, who questioned why then, had the SWR filed a case with the Directorate of Settlement and Land Re-



ords (DSLRL) seeking possession, if their ownership was already established.

Viriato then referenced a crucial May 2022 correspondence between the DSLR Director Johnson B Fernandes and RVNL Deputy General Manager S G Banerjee. The letter explicitly stated that without specific title documentation from the Portuguese government or survey numbers, Railways cannot claim ownership of the land.

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“We, as aggrieved villagers, are grateful to our South Goa MP, the Velsao village panchayat, the various NGOs, activists and people from across Goa who came and expressed their solidarity with the beleaguered residents of Velsao in their just struggle to assert their right on their inherited land. The villagers possess land title documents from the Portuguese era, and will not allow the illegal appropriation by SWR for a coal corridor project

– Orville Dourado Rodrigues, founder, Goencho Ekvott

the Railways,” read an important extract from the letter DSLR had written to RVNL regarding this matter. The locals pointed out that the DSLR response was in connection to an application that had been filed by the SWR in 2022 to the DSLR, asking that the SWR be granted title documents for the land which villagers consider as their Right Of Way.

It was also pointed out that the matter along with other grievances with the Railways is currently being heard at the Inspector of Survey and Land Records (ISLR) Court in Margao, with 46 respondents including the Velsao-Pale-Isorcim village panchayat.

Finally, after all these discussions and following a long telephonic conver-

sation between the Collector (South district) and the South Goa MP, it was revealed that the Collector had apparently acknowledged potential contempt of court given the sub-judice nature of the case.

The MP told reporters that the Collector said she would immediately issue a stop work order to SWR/RVNL. The MP also requested the Collector to issue an order asking the Railways to restore the land to its original condition.

Upon hearing the stance of the Collector, the railway officials promptly withdrew from the area, moving their heavy machinery and mud-laden trucks out of the disputed site.

While this represents a victory for the villagers, they continue to await a

formal order ensuring work won't resume in the coming days, vowing to continue their resistance against what they allege is an unauthorised encroachment on their fundamental right to access their own homes.

While there is fear amongst the locals that the State Government has plans to hand over the land to SWR, the residents still want ISLR to decide on the matter given that the villagers possess title documents showing their ownership extends to the railway line. The case, which began its first hearing on January 6, 2025, is scheduled for its third hearing on February 17. A suit has also been filed in the District Court after ISLR had not granted an interim stay order, as requested.

## Residents, commuters demand safety patrols at Margao's KTC bus stand

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** Bus passengers and residents of Fatorda have voiced serious concerns over safety at the Kadamba Transport (KTC) bus stand in Margao.

Reports indicate that inter-State bus drivers, primarily from other States, are causing disturbances in the area, which has resulted in heightened feelings of insecurity, especially among women.

In response to these concerns, citizens are calling for immediate intervention from the police and the implementation of measures to ensure the safety of all passengers.

It has come to light that many inter-State bus drivers and conductors, most of them migrants from neighbouring States, are seen behaving inappropriately, including sleeping and moving around half-naked, sometimes under the influence of alcohol. Some have even been found resting in open areas or bathing openly.

Milagres Fernandes, a local resident, spoke to reporters, pointing out that the KTC bus stand, being one of the main bus hubs in Margao, sees hundreds of passengers daily, including many women.

“Many passengers, particularly women, walk home from the bus stand late in the evening, and many have to pass through the poorly lit, secluded lanes behind the bus stand. The suspicious, inappropriate behaviour of some bus drivers and conductors

“I often arrive in Margao around 7.30 p.m. after work. There have been multiple instances where passengers like me feel unsafe walking through the bus stand parking area due to the presence of suspicious individuals

– Fatima Dias, commuter

“Many passengers, particularly women, walk home from the bus stand late in the evening, and many have to pass through the poorly lit, secluded lanes behind the bus stand. The suspicious, inappropriate behaviour of some out-of-State bus drivers and conductors makes them feel unsafe

– Milagres Fernandes, Madel local

It has come to light that many inter-State bus drivers and conductors, most of them migrants from neighbouring States, are seen behaving inappropriately, including sleeping at the bus stop and moving around half-naked, sometimes under the influence of alcohol

makes them feel unsafe,” he said. He has called for the KTC to implement safety measures and for regular police patrols to ensure a sense of security, especially for female passengers.

Fatima Dias, a daily commuter to Panjim, also shared her experiences.

“I often arrive in Margao around 7.30 pm after work. There have been multiple instances where passengers like me feel unsafe walking through the bus stand parking area due to the presence of suspicious individuals,” she said. Fatima urged the authorities to take action to prevent such nuisances and ensure passenger safety.

## GBS endemic to Pune, not a threat in Goa yet: GMC Dean

Team Herald

**PANJIM:** Goa Medical College (GMC) Dean Prof Dr Shivanand Bandekar has reassured the public that Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) is not a significant health threat in Goa yet, urging people not to panic.

“GBS is endemic in Pune, but the situation in Goa is not alarming,” Dr Bandekar stated. He explained that GBS patients typically present with symptoms such as diarrhoea, followed by weakness beginning in the lower limbs and progressing to the abdomen, diaphragm, breathing muscles, and upper limbs. Respiratory paralysis is the most critical complication, requiring close monitoring and, in severe cases, ICU ventilator support.

“Pune has reported an outbreak of Guillain-Barré Syndrome, known as adult polio, with over 70 patients treated since January 9

“The viral infection starts with symptoms of diarrhoea and progresses

to weakness and tingling in the limbs and finally to respiratory paralysis in severe cases

“Maintaining personal hygiene is crucial - wash/sanitize hands often, and especially before eating; avoid crowded areas

Dr Bandekar clarified that GBS is a viral infection, sometimes referred to as ‘adult polio’, and emphasised the importance of maintaining good personal hygiene to prevent the condition, especially in endemic regions. “Wash hands before eating and maintain proper hygiene. While there is no vaccine for GBS, basic hygiene can help reduce the risk,” he advised.

GMC sees around one to

two sporadic cases of GBS each month, with no clusters emerging from specific areas of the State. “We are equipped with plasmapheresis, a cutting-edge treatment method introduced during Covid-19, to filter out the virus. It has been an effective tool in treating GBS patients,” he added.

Dr Bandekar reiterated that while GBS remains a concern in areas like Pune, there is no cause for alarm in Goa.

## Margao Urban Health Centre set to resume ops after repairs

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** The Margao Urban Health Centre is expected to reopen in the coming weeks as ongoing repair work nears completion. According to sources, the repairs are likely to be finished within the next 20 days, after which the premises will be handed back to the health department for the final phase of painting and reinstatement of services.

The health centre was temporarily closed after part of its façade collapsed on 8 July 2023, necessitating a relocation of services. Since then, health services have been shuffled multiple times, first moving to the Old Heritage Hospicio structure and later transferring the OPD (Outpatient Department) to the South District Hospital.

Additionally, a new water pump is being installed at the health centre to provide an adequate water supply for cleaning and gardening.

Currently, the OPD operates from the district hospital, while the administrative office continues to function from the Old Hospicio building.

## WRD desilts storm drains in Seralim to avert flooding

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** Desilting of stormwater drains in Seralim village by the Water Resources Department (WRD) began on Tuesday, with farmers urging the government to take steps to prevent the flooding of their fields during the monsoon. The farmers' concerns stem from the inundation of their fields over the past two years, attributed to the construction of the Western Bypass.

Benaulim MLA Venzy Viegas, accompanied by Seralim panchayat members, commented on the desilting initiative and said focus is on clearing major water channels, including the Sarnabandh to Folga nallah up to the Western Bypass, and the Pandimoda to Palmirabai nallah. Viegas emphasised the need to improve water flow and protect water resources to mitigate flooding and ensure sustainability.

He added that such desilting of nullahs as well as smaller water

bodies is being carried out early this year to ensure that by April-May, water channels leading to the River Sal are clear. This measure aims to prevent water from flowing backward, which has previously caused low-lying fields to flood due to blockages created by the bypass construction.

Viegas criticised the State government for the poorly-designed Western Bypass which he said failed to take into account villagers' concerns about flooding that had already occurred when the bypass was being constructed. He also highlighted the recommendations of central expert Union Highway Minister Nitin Gadkari to study Benaulim's flood-prone zones. Pandey's report had urgently recommended comprehensive drainage measures, including the desilting and dredging of the River Sal to improve its discharge capacity. He also called for additional culverts on the Varca road to address the inadequacy of the existing drainage system.

## Sal sewage pollution: HC seeks affidavits from govt

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** The High Court of Bombay at Goa has directed the respondents in a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) concerning the discharge of sewage into Saipem Lake and River Sal to submit their affidavits at the earliest. The PIL, filed by Professor Antonio Alvares, has brought attention to pollution issues affecting these water bodies. The matter has been adjourned to February 18.

During the hearing held on Tuesday, Adv M Salkar, counsel for the Goa State Pollution Control Board (GSPCB), assured the court that the affidavit in reply would be served to the counsel for the respective parties by the end of the day. He also informed the court that he had been instructed to represent the South Goa Planning and Development Authority (SGPDA), which manages the retail and wholesale markets in the area. Adv Salkar sought two weeks to file an affidavit on behalf of the SGPDA.

The Margao Municipal Council (MMC) has also been directed to submit an affidavit addressing overall issues, including those pertaining to the SGPDA markets.

The division bench, comprising Justice Nivedita P Mehta and Justice M S Karnik, granted permission to the Sewerage and Infrastructural Development Corporation of Goa Limited to file its affidavit during the week, and directed the Navelim panchayat to submit an affidavit by February 10.

## Flavia Barretto takes over as Varca sarpanch

Team Herald

**MARGAO:** Flavia Barretto has been elected unopposed as the new Sarpanch of Varca Village Panchayat, following the resignation of her predecessor, Selesiana (Selu) Fernandes.

The election process was overseen by Dhaklu R Ghadi from the Salcete Block Development Office (BDO) on Tuesday at the Varca panchayat office.

Flavia's election came after Selu had stepped down earlier this month in adherence to a mutual seat-sharing agreement among the Panchayat members. Expressing her gratitude to the voters and her fellow panch members for their support, Flavia assured them of her dedication to serving the people of Varca.

Representing Ward No



VIII (Fatrade), Flavia, while speaking to the media after the elections, stated that her focus will be on taking forward the village's development plans.

Elaborating further, Flavia pledged to prioritise a range of developmental projects, including garbage management, beautifying public spaces and digitising panchayat records.



The roads in Panjim are simply non motorable. All kinds of transport face the same issues. In this context the advice given to commuters by the SP Traffic is simply amusing. Herald Media asked people how the SP could request citizens to take public transport, due to the bad roads in Panjim, where even SUVs find it extremely difficult to move through the city.

“This is a terrible situation where roads are dug up, footpaths are not proper, there is no proper parking space and no proper bus stop points. No proper connectivity of public transportation in all parts of the city. Don't forget, Panjim is the capital city of Goa. Locals are coming into the city for work, as well as the tourists - so imagine the flooding of vehicles. And you are asking the public to face the inconvenience. So I would like to tell the SP that you had to put a big stop on the government and blame the government for the continuous inconvenience they have caused to the public. There is no planning, there is no coordination and that is why everyone is suffering.

– Cecille Rodrigues, social activist

## HOW CAN SP TRAFFIC EXPECT PEOPLE TO USE PUBLIC TRANSPORT, WHEN CARS CANNOT ACCESS PANJIM'S DUG-UP ROADS?

“See how daring this SP traffic is. He says do not bring vehicles into the city. If you bring vehicles and do wrong parking, we will fine you. So you are inconveniencing us and if we park anywhere, you will fine us. This is totally unwarranted. He says 45 buses have been commissioned by the Smart City project and KTC, but how do we reach these buses? We will have to go by car to catch these buses. So where will we park these cars? Is there enough parking place at the KTC bus stand? Is there any place at Miramar to park cars? How will we reach Panjim to catch these buses to commute within the city? So where will we park our cars? The SP should reply.

– Francis Coelho, social activist

“I come from Old Goa. The only means of transport suitable for us is a scooter. The places I can access, and the work I can carry out by travelling via scooter, I will not be able to do using public transport (as advised by the SP). If you take a round in Panjim, you will see that the same roads are dug up again and again. And I think that the government is not paying attention to this. The concerned departments of the government have to see how many times these roads are repaired and how many times these same roads are dug up. I think the government is paying less attention to these matters.

– Vishal Volvoikar, Old Goa resident



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