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Indian settlers in Andamans seek special rights

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PORT BLAIR, India (Reuters) - Thousands of settlers marched in the remote Andaman and Nicobar islands on Thursday, threatening violent protests if their demands for special rights were not met, police and witnesses said.

More than 3,000 people from eastern India, who were settled in several islands across the archipelago decades ago, gathered in the capital Port Blair demanding they be declared tribal people as that would entitle them to special privileges.

"Our community has been largely ignored and we have been forgotten after we developed the islands," Sylvester Bhengra of the Ranchi Association in Andaman said during a rally.

The association represents the Ranchi community, after the city of the same name from where they were first brought in 1918, while India was under British rule, voluntary group ActionAid said.

There are more than 65,000 Ranchis, accounting for over 13 percent of the population of the archipelago, which is located about 1,200 km east of the mainland, it said.

Under the Indian constitution, tribal people are entitled to special rights when they seek college places or government jobs as part of a largely successful affirmative action programme.

New Delhi settled tens of thousands of veterans as well as poor villagers from the mainland to work as labourers to secure India's rights over the archipelago.

India also wanted to see off a claim by nearby Indonesia after Indonesian President Sukarno offered to take the islands to help Pakistan during its 1965 war with India.

But leaders of local tribespeople living on the islands for centuries have been voicing concern, saying a tide of settlers was threatening to overwhelm them.

The cluster of more than 550 islands, of which only about three dozen are inhabited, are home to six tribes of Mongoloid and African origin who have lived there for thousands of years.

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