



Cultural Survival Launches Campaign to Halt Coal Mine in Bangladesh

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Cambridge, Feb. 9, 2011. Seeking to avert a “humanitarian and ecological catastrophe,” today Cultural Survival launched a campaign to prevent UK-based Global Coal Management Resources (GCM) from building one of the world’s largest open-pit coal mines in one of the world’s poorest countries, Bangladesh.

If allowed to move forward, GCM’s Phulbari Coal Mine Project would forcibly displace as many as 220,000 people, bulldoze thousands of homes, and destroy 12,000 acres of fertile farmland.

“The project threatens some of Bangladesh’s most vulnerable Indigenous peoples who trace their ancestry in the region back 5,000 years,” says campaign organizer Paula Palmer, who directs Cultural Survival’s Global Response Program. Bangladesh’s National Indigenous Union (Jatiya Adivasi Parishad) estimates that 50,000 Indigenous people belonging to 23 different tribal groups would be displaced or impoverished by the mine.

“The company is offering displaced families cash, not equivalent land, because no land is available in Bangladesh,” Palmer adds. Studies show that cash payments to such ‘development refugees’ results in their impoverishment. Indigenous leaders fear that their ancient cultures and languages would not survive forced displacement and dispersal of their land-based communities. “Forced relocation violates the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” Palmer emphasized.

In support of tens of thousands of Bangladeshi people who have marched and demonstrated against the Phulbari coal project since 2005, Cultural Survival is calling on its members to write letters to Bangladeshi government officials and US Ambassador Jamies Moriarty. A diplomatic cable released by WikiLeaks reveals that the ambassador actively intervened to push Phulbari the project forward. In the July 2009 cable, Moriarty

cites 60 percent US investment in GCM and urges the Energy Advisor to Bangladesh's Prime Minister to authorize open-pit mining as "the best way forward."

In addition to its grave human rights concerns, Cultural Survival cites multiple environmental threats posed by the Phulbari project. An Expert Committee commissioned by the Bangladesh government warned that draining the mine's 1000-foot-deep open pits would lower the water table in the agricultural lands surrounding the mine site. Air, water, and soil would be contaminated with mercury, lead, arsenic and other toxins, and acid mine drainage could continue to poison the environment for centuries.

Of greatest concern to the Mangrove Action Project (MAP), an international coalition of scientists and organizations which has also joined the campaign, are the potential impacts on the Sundarbans, a vast mangrove forest through which barges would transport the coal and transfer it to ocean-going vessels. The Expert Committee reported a high risk of spills and accidents that could damage the mangroves that protect Bangladesh's lowlands against cyclones and provide vital habitat for many endangered species, including the Bengal tiger.

Opposition to GMC's Phulbari project led to bloodshed in 2006 when "paramilitary forces opened fire on tens of thousands of peaceful demonstrators, killing three people including a 14-year-old boy and wounding hundreds," according to Joanna Levitt, Executive Director of the International Accountability Project, a San Francisco-based organization that is also working to halt the mine. "Despite violence and intimidation aimed at silencing opponents," Levitt adds, "some 100,000 people participated in a 250-mile Long March from Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital, to Phulbari this past October."

In the aftermath of the 2006 killings, a national strike shut the country down for four days and was brought to an end only when the government agreed to permanently throw GCM (formerly known as Asia Energy) out of the country and ban open pit mining. This pledge has yet to be fulfilled. With a recently elected administration in place and a new coal policy to be announced by June 2011, GCM hopes to be in business in Bangladesh soon.

The potential for further violence remains very high. The World Organization Against Torture expressed "serious concern that further violence, ill-treatment and even deaths may ensue if local communities again seek to give public expression to their opposition." The Expert Committee noted a "high risk of social unrest and conflict" if the relocation of thousands of people is attempted.

"GCM's determination to push the Phulbari project forward despite the enormity of the political, environmental, and humanitarian risks," Levitt says, "stands in stark contrast to actions taken by the Asian Development Bank, Barclays, and RSB - all of which have withdrawn from investing in the project since 2008."

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For 40 years Cultural Survival has worked to help the world's Indigenous Peoples defend their threatened lands, languages, cultures, and environments. The organization has advocacy campaigns around the world and has long-term programs in Central America and North America. It also publishes the premier magazine on Indigenous issues, *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, and its website, www.cs.org, contains one of the most comprehensive archives of information on Indigenous Peoples.

The International Accountability Project is a San Francisco-based human rights organization that works in coalition with grassroots and international partners to challenge destructive development projects that uproot and impoverish millions of people each year and advocates for international policies that protect the rights and livelihoods of people threatened with unjust development. To learn more, visit: <http://www.accountabilityproject.org>