

Human Rights Defenders Alert - India

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Dear Sir,

***Sub: HRD Alert - India - Urgent Appeal for Action –India/Tamil Nadu:
Tirunelveli/Koodankulam - attack on innocent people protesting against Nuclear
power Plant - Reg***

Greetings from Human Rights Defenders Alert - India!

HRD Alert - India is a Forum of Human Rights Defenders for Human Rights Defenders. It endeavours to initiate actions on behalf of Human Rights Defenders under threat or with security concerns.

We are now writing to express our grave concern over the government's acts of blocking the supply of food and water in Idinthakarai where people are protesting the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant.

Incident

Place of incident: Idinthakarai village, Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu

Date of incident: 20th March 2012 till date

Incident:

About Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant Project:

Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant is a nuclear power station coming up in Koodankulam in the Tirunelveli district of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

The Kudankulam Nuclear Power Project, worth Rs. 13,000 crores and being set up with assistance from Russia will upon completion have six reactors, making this as India's

largest power-generating complex. A pair of two 1,000 megawatt reactors will kick start production. It has been said that it will solve Tamil Nadu's massive power shortage.

An Inter-Governmental Agreement for the project was signed on November 20, 1988 by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, for the construction of two reactors. The construction of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant eventually began in 1997.

Kudankulam Anti-Nuclear Power Plant protests:

The Koodankulam Anti-Nuclear protest has stood out as a symbol of non-violent protest. Since its inception, the People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy (PMANE) and the villagers had been opposing the plant for about 25 years due to the Environmental impact of nuclear power and its threat to the people and environment.

Though the anti-nuclear protest is years old, the agitations have intensified in the past seven months, in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Thousands of protesters and villagers living around the Kudankulam nuclear plant have been staging their protests in the form of hunger strikes, preventing further construction work, and demanding its closure as they fear environmental impact of nuclear power, radioactive wastes contaminating the ecology and nuclear accidents similar to the radiation leak in March at Japan's Fukushima nuclear reactor following the Tsunami that hit it. Dr. SP Udayakumar, anti-Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant campaigner of PMANE has been at the frontline of the movement.

The protesters have stated specific reasons for opposing the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KKNPP) project: "More than 1 million people live within the 30 km radius of the KKNPP which far exceeds the AERB (Atomic Energy Regulatory Board) stipulations. It is quite impossible to evacuate these many people quickly and efficiently in case of a nuclear disaster at Koodankulam. Safety analysis report and the site evaluation study have not been made public and no public hearing was held".

For many months Idinthakarai village, which is less than a 10 minutes' drive from the nuke plant (located about 11 kms from Radhapuram Taluk, Tirunelveli) has been the epicentre for protests by villagers and fishermen who say the Kudankulam plant is not safe. In September 2011, the state cabinet had passed a resolution demanding that the Prime Minister order a halt of operations at Kudankulam till those living in the area were

convinced that they are not at risk. Dr Manmohan Singh then deputed experts and ministers to assess the plant and answer the questions of villagers. Meanwhile the central government accused certain non governmental organisations of diverting foreign funds to fuel the protests and have frozen the bank accounts including the Tuticorin diocese.

The Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Ms Jayalalithaa had also commissioned her own panel of experts to study the plant. Her clearance for the project came right after an important by-election in the Tirunelveli district, where the plant is located. In an attempt to pacify the people there, she announced a 500 crore package to improve roads and infra-structure in the area.

Amid protests by thousands of villagers, more than 300 scientists and engineers, including some Russians, were escorted into the Kudankulam nuclear plant to get to work after the Tamil Nadu government cleared the project on 20th March 2012.

Over 4,000 police personnel and four companies of Central Reserve Police Force's rapid action force were deployed in Idinthakarai to neutralise the agitation and nab key members of anti-KKNPP group against whom cases had been filed.

Section 144 which bans groups of people from gathering in public places has been announced in and around Kudankulam and there is tight security near the plant. But thousands of villagers gathered in an overnight vigil to make their discontent known.

More than 180 people were arrested, including 15 activists who were leading their seven-month-long movement. They have been charged with sedition and waging war against the country.

Eighteen men arrested at Koodankulam are being held at Tirunelveli armed reserve camp. Nine people including Adv. Sivasubramanian and Rajalingom, who are members of the Struggle Committee, were arrested yesterday and are now charged with sedition including Sections 121, 121A and 153A and their whereabouts are unknown. In the meantime, Muhilan, another leading activist of the People's Movement against Nuclear Energy (PMANE) was arrested on his way to Idinthakarai and he is being kept at the police headquarters in Tirunelveli and is allegedly being subjected to torture by the police personnel there.

Dr SP Udayakumar and 14 others are on an indefinite hunger strike which entered the third day today.

Hundreds of fishermen and their families thronged the protest site and joined the indefinite hunger strike condemning the state cabinet nod for continuing work at the plant. He is leading in protest around 5000 villagers and refused to hold talks with two local police officers who had come in their personal capacities to end the deadlock. A School run by the wife of Dr. S P Udayakumar, who is leading the protest, was damaged badly on the night of 20th March 2012 and the School bus was also damaged.

Recent issues in the protest site:

There are apprehensions of possible public health problems and food shortage in a few days at Idinthakarai. Protestors including women and children are sleeping in open spaces. There are 8000 children among the 20,000 protesting people.

Electricity, Water and Food Supply has been cut off in Idinthakarai owing to all roads and sea routes to reach Idinthakarai being blocked by the police and the coast guard. Police personnel forcibly took away mobiles phones and water supply equipments. Milk supply to the village has also been blocked and it has affected the children badly. The media had also been prevented from entering Idinthakarai until yesterday afternoon.

Elsewhere in the area, people refused to talk to the media and remained indoors. Public Distribution Shops and others were closed and children did not go to school.

Children from the area who are appearing for the ongoing 12th Grade examinations have to walk a distance of 12 KM to the exam centre since transport has been blocked.

A private medical facility in the area was not allowed to venture out of the area to get much needed medical supplies.

Police and para-military forces are terrorising people by marching into the village every two hours and then withdrawing.

Vehicle movement has been totally stalled for the last three days and public have been urged to refrain from forming groups as police authorities have invoked Section 144 of the IPC in Radhapuram taluk until April 2, 2012. Therefore people there are unable to walk or move around. Despite this curfew, people keep coming to Idinthakarai by boats and on foot visiting the fasting site to show solidarity with this agitation spearheaded by PMANE.

The people who are opposing the project are concerned about their future livelihood and environmental destruction irrespective of any compensation package. In addition, they have been deprived of their right to participate in decision making regarding the project by the government, which is a basic right of those affected by any development project.

Observing a series of violations against the villagers protesting the Kudankulam project, including the issues of arrests, and the water, milk and electricity supply being blocked, it is clear that the state government consistently fails to respect, protect and fulfill the human rights of those people. Instead, the government promotes violence against them. The situation gets worsening in Idinthakarai which will gravely affect the people's livelihood, food security and the environment.

Human Rights Defenders Alert strongly condemns these anti-democratic developments at the site of the protest and holds that no development project should be launched without respecting human rights. It is one of the basic principles and duties of India to uphold the various international human rights laws, as a state party.

Appeal

We, therefore, urge you to immediately take necessary steps to

1. Guarantee in all circumstances the physical and psychological integrity of all the activists of anti-Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant Campaign and villagers who are protesting in a peaceful manner;
2. Ensure the villagers' right to participate in decision - making for the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant project, as well as their right to assemble peacefully.
3. Restore normalcy in Idinthakarai by taking immediate steps to ensure the supply of water, milk and electricity as it severely affects the livelihood of the people especially children;

Looking forward to your immediate action in this regard,

Yours sincerely,

Henri Tiphagne

Hon. National Working Secretary,

Human Rights Defenders Alert - India