
Mega-projects and the criminalization of struggles to defend people's rights in India and Honduras

Since December is the month in which International Human Rights Day is commemorated, we feel it is urgent to highlight the cases of two communities in countries that seem very distant from one another and yet have a great deal in common. In Honduras and India, these communities have been struggling for years against the new form of colonialism represented by powerful economic groups connected with oil palm plantations and the iron and steel industry, respectively.

Based on a large-scale, extractivist, export-oriented industrial model, these companies are responsible for human rights violations in the communities where they have set up operations. Earning profits is more important than anything else, and this justifies the use of any means to silence the voices of resistance in order to achieve large-scale production for export to countries on the global market that consume large quantities of palm oil, iron and steel.

Whether they are national or international, steel companies or agricultural enterprises, they arrive with promises of development, well-being and employment for the community, but it does not take long for the reality of these capitalist enterprises to come to light, which has nothing to do with the promises made or the interests of the local communities.

Local communities react by organizing, seeking information, denouncing irregularities, demanding respect for their right to their land and territory – their means of survival and sustenance – and fighting back not only against the appropriation and destruction of ecosystems, but also the violation of human rights.

Faced with this opposition to their operations, the companies are swift to respond. With government backing, they criminalize local community movements through threats, news stories discrediting local community leaders or the denunciations made by these movements, prison sentences for unspecified causes, unfair trials, police and/or military repression, and sometimes even murder.

India: Leader of the anti-POSCO movement kidnapped by Orissa state authorities

South Korea's Pohang Steel Company (POSCO) has plans to build a steel plant with a production capacity of four million tons in the state of Orissa in eastern India, for which it needs some 1,500 hectares of land (see WRM Bulletins 147, 155, 157 and 163).

Of this total, 1,200 hectares are forest land, and the company is currently negotiating with the Orissa state government for authorization to deforest the area to make way for the plant. According to the government, “only” 60 hectares are private land. What it fails to mention is that this “only” represents two communities that are home to 600 families, who would be displaced.

For a number of years, a local movement of fisherfolk and peasant farmers in the communities of Dhinkia and Gobindpur has been fighting back against the attempts of the government of Orissa, and the multinational POSCO, to turn these lands over to the iron ore mining and steel plant project,

which would include the construction of a highway to provide access to the plant.

Although the government claims that the land acquisition process has been peaceful, protestors and activists maintain that the government has coerced them into giving in by deploying a huge number of police officers in the area. Abhay Sahoo, one of the leaders of POSCO Pratirodh Sangram Samiti (PPSS, which means Group to Resist POSCO), wonders why the government is so upset over obstacles to this project. The local communities are defending their vibrant economy based on betel, fish and rice production, which would allow them to ensure the well-being of future generations "without any such project, which promises only to destroy everything around us," Sahoo told the IPS news agency (see <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=56216>).

As a consequence of this opposition, Sahoo was arrested in late November near the proposed site of the steel plant and is currently being held in preventive custody, after a request for bail was denied. This is happening after the inhabitants of Dhinkia and Gobindpur heroically resisted – in the blistering heat of summer and for more than two months – the attacks of the police, drawing the entire country's attention to the threat to their prosperous local economy and ecosystems. It is also taking place in the context of denunciations made to the Ministry of the Environment regarding the authorization for the company to clear forests for the project, which they consider immoral and contrary to their wishes – referring to a recent bill that requires the consent of 80% of the population.

The situation recently became even more dramatic, when more than 500 armed men – a sort of private militia – backed by the police and the government came in to break up a non-violent demonstration organized by the PPSS, in which 2,000 people, including men, women and children, formed a human barricade by lying on the ground to prevent the company from entering the area. The militia attacked the protesters with bombs and guns, injuring at least eight people, including one woman who was seriously wounded.

The communities of Dhinkia and Gobindpur need our solidarity. The repression of the PPSS movement, the arrest of movement leader Abhay Sahoo, and the attack on the peaceful demonstration by these two communities deserve the condemnation of the international community, as does the POSCO mega-project: in addition to being socially unjust and economically destructive, it is responsible for the violation of human rights in Orissa. (A sample letter to the government and Human Rights Commission of India is available here: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/India/letter12-2011.html>).

Honduras: Urgent call for solidarity with the Bajo Aguán Campesino Movement

The Campesino Movement of Bajo Aguán, in northern Honduras, recently published an open letter which declares: "The Massacre in Bajo Aguán Must Be Stopped Urgently!" In addition to sounding an alarm over the extreme situation in the region, the letter is also a call for support from the international community, including peoples, governments and institutions (see <http://movimientocampesinodelaguan.blogspot.com/2011/11/llamamiento-urgente-de-solidaridad-con.html>).

The people of Bajo Aguán live in constant danger, with "a military and police presence which has recently increased significantly – a presence which has been repeatedly blamed for its role in the repression," the letter states.

"The seriousness of the problem was highlighted on October 24, at the 143rd Period of Sessions of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), which noted the increase in murders – 42

members of campesino organizations were murdered between September 2009 and October 2011 – persecutions, threats and intimidation of 3,500 campesino families demanding their right to land and food, and who find themselves completely defenceless when confronted with the criminal repression and plunder by the Honduran oligarchy, primarily associated with oil palm production in this region and closely linked with the political regime installed after the 2009 coup. In addition to these murders, there are legal proceedings against more than 160 campesinos – as of July 2011 – forced evictions, and the destruction of the homes and livelihoods of entire villages.

“According to the reports and public statements available, over 600,000 of the country's families are landless, and the Honduran state has no agrarian strategy to deal with this serious social problem. The land conflict in Honduras became more polarized as a result of the 1992 Agricultural Modernization Law, which allowed the existing limits on land tenure to be exceeded, leading to enormous plantations in Bajo Aguán concentrated in the hands of large landowners such as Miguel Facussé, Reynaldo Canales and René Morales Carazo,” the letter reports.

In an interview with Rel-UITA, a local campesino leader stressed, “Campesino families are demanding land because they have nothing to eat. We need to grow our own food and also to contribute to the local and national economy. Monoculture plantations are one of the reasons that has led us to this land conflict, and we cannot continue to perpetuate this model.” (See “Palma africana y derechos humanos. El agua y el aceite”

at http://www.rel-uita.org/agricultura/palma_africana/index.htm)

The open letter notes that “while death and terror continue to sweep through the fields of Bajo Aguán, and the regime criminalizes the campesino struggle and intensifies the militarization of the area, its leader, Porfirio Lobo, assures the world that the peace and reconciliation process in the country is making progress, thereby securing the reintegration of the State of Honduras into the Organization of American States (OAS) and other international bodies as an active member with full voting rights. At the same time, free rein is given to ambitious plans for investment, indebtedness and occupation of the country's territory, in order to increase the plundering and depredation. Far from achieving this peace and reconciliation, the Honduran people are suffering the impacts of a system which has collapsed.”

“Beginning in June of this year, with the involvement of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the World Bank, the United States and others, and justified by a new Central American Regional Security Initiative which is supposedly aimed at more effectively combating the drug trade and other forms of organized crime, strong support and increased supplies are being provided precisely to those sectors most implicated in these crimes. This new transnationalization of a very peculiar concept of security, always under US control, already has many precedents in the country and the region, including the ‘security chapter’ incorporated into NAFTA, whose results in Mexico can be clearly seen. We also cannot ignore its links with policies for investment, indebtedness and territorial control, under which, in the Bajo Aguán and Garífuna coastal areas, among other parts of Honduras, there are efforts to impose projects for ‘greenwashed’ land grabbing – ‘renewable energy’, ‘ecological reforestation’ and ‘sustainable tourism’ – despite the opposition of local populations whose means of livelihood are increasingly threatened.”

Among other requests, the open letter calls on the Organization of American States to urgently designate a verification commission for the situation in Bajo Aguán, with the support of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). It also urges “international financial institutions, investors and international ‘donors’ to suspend all operations that affect the region, until their necessity and legitimacy are confirmed from the perspective of the rights of the affected

communities.”

With regard to the Honduran authorities, the letter demands that they respect their commitments to the international community, by upholding human rights, ending the criminalization of campesino movements, stopping forced evictions, preventing the advance of agribusiness at the expense of food and territorial sovereignty, and demilitarizing the region.

We call on the international community to offer their solidarity to the Honduran people and to remain alert to the highly dangerous situation in Honduras and particularly the Bajo Aguán region.

These two cases are representative of many others in Latin America, Africa and Asia, where those responsible for imposing a large-scale, extractivist industrial model and promoting excessive consumption in line with the rules of global capitalism respond with criminalization, repression, militarization and death to those who refuse to surrender their land, territories, culture and traditional forms of production to a ferocious commodification of nature.