
Bangladesh: Gas pipeline threatens Lawachhara National Park

In a report, the environmental activist Philip Gain describes how oil giant Unocal is setting a gas pipeline through the Lawachhara National Park, posing a major threat on that unique patch of forest. What follows are excerpts of Gain's report:

Lawachhara National Park, a 1250 hectare forest patch, is part of the West Bhanugachh Reserved Forest in the Maulvi Bazar district. The state of the public forestlands outside the Sundarbans in the southwest of the country is appalling.

The Lawachhara National Park is home to diverse plant species and rare wildlife like Hoolock Gibbon, a threatened primate species, as well as many species of birds. On the winter morning of 18 January (2005) we head for Lawachhara National Park from Sreemangal town. It takes hardly 20 minutes to reach the park along a road that cuts through a huge tea estate of Sterling Company, Finley. Most of what we see as tea estates today used to be forest a century and a half ago. Now we see a fenced area on our right hand side as we go north. This is the newly established Maulvi Bazar Gas Plant. Close to it is the Magurchhara gas well that exploded in 1997 and the massive inferno caused immense harm to the soil, trees, people [ethnic community, Khasis in particular], and wildlife. From here we follow the rail track through the park.

As we advance we come to a point where the rail track and a mud road crisscross. The mud road disappears into the forest in the northwest. We are to follow the mud road. We are charmed at the diversity and size of the trees at this point. As we go further down we feel like being in a true forest, which is rarely seen on the public forestlands outside the Sundarbans. The golden sunshine blended with the mist spray around through stages of the forest. But our amazement is disturbed by massive size steel pipes and construction workers all along the mud trail. We have already known that a gas pipe line is cutting through the National Park. Unocal, a multinational oil giant is installing a gas pipeline under a contract with Petrobangla.

The setting up of the gas pipe line violates the Bangladesh Wildlife (Preservation) Order of 1973. This Order prohibits "any type of hunting, killing or capturing of wild animal or making disturbances within the park as well as within one mile radius area from the outer boundary of the park." The Order also prohibits cutting of trees, gathering of other forest products, extraction of barks or causing any harm to plants. The environmentalists argue that according to the Environment Conservation Act, 1995 and the Environment Conservation Rules, 1997 no commercial activity such as setting a gas pipe line can be set through the Lawachhara National Park.

Nishorgo, a project to protect the Lawachhara National Park, is funded by the US Government through USAID. The same government supports setting up of the pipeline through the park at high risk.

The gas pipeline could have been set up in a roundabout way from the well site. There are opinions that Unocal is setting the gas pipeline through the park to save money.

Unocal overtly talks about the protection of the forests and environment. No one will miss scores of Unocal signboards with nice words for the protection of the trees and wild animals. Some signboards bear advices or warning about not disturbing the animals.

Nasir Ahmed, Unocal's manager for external affairs stated in Dhaka that no machine would be used at the time of setting up of the pipes and that everything would be done manually. The day we visited the park, five generators were running to produce electricity for welding activities. The generators were issuing immense noise around. We had no doubt the Hoolock Gibbons went into hiding. We gave up the hope of seeing the rare wildlife.

We followed the mud trail through the forest to the end. Steel pipes were scattered all over the trail. Unocal officials (foreigners) tried to convince us that the pipeline would cause no harm to the forest because the pipes will lay under the ground. They also said that bricks will be put on two sides of the mud road so that Forest Department trucks can move. This is frightening. Given the size of the park, one can imagine what would happen to this forest once the mud road is ready for heavy vehicles.

There are already gas wells and pipelines around the park. The explosions and fires that we have witnessed in Magurchhara and Tengratila [gas field in eastern Chhatak which exploded in January of this year and caught fire cracking the soil of the area and burning down 40 houses] are signals that the pipeline to transport gas through park is a threatening act.

The prime minister's office hastily gave permission in October 2004 for the installation of the gas pipeline. Unocal claims it has rightly assessed the situation. But there are allegations, the environmental assessment (Initial Environmental Examination and Environmental Impact Assessment) done so far are eyewash and flawed. It is difficult to judge these reports because they have not been made available to the public. On the one side of the Lawachhara National Park is Magurchhara Khasi Punji (village) and on the other side is Lawachhara Khasi Punji. There has not been any consultation with the Punji people regarding the pipeline. In 1997 the fire accident at Magurchhara caused enough damage to the people of the Magurchhara Punji in particular for them to be worried about the pipeline through the park.

So, Unocal's contention that the gas pipeline through the Lawachhara National Park will not cause any concern does not satisfy the environmental groups and the local people.

The condition of our reserved and protected forests is precarious. Now, if a patch like Lawachhara National Park is further threatened, it is a very bad signal. Many fear that the pipeline through the Lawachhara National Park is the beginning of a process of demise of a unique forest with unique diversity.

Excerpted from "Lawachhara National Park under Severe Threat", Philip Gain, sent by the author, Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), E-mail: