
Bangladesh: Sundarban mangrove forests menaced by oil and gas extraction by India

The Sundarban, covering some 10,000 square kilometres of land and water, is the largest contiguous block of coastal mangrove forests in the world and is part of the world's largest delta formed from sediments deposited by the three great rivers —the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna— which converge on the Bengal Basin.

The UNESCO had declared a portion of the Bangladesh Sundarban as World Heritage site in 1997, and the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) has funded projects to save it from degradation.

The total area of the Bangladesh part of the Sundarban is 5,771 square kilometres (almost 62 per cent of the total), of which 4,071 square kilometres is land and the rest water. The rest lies in India, stretching along the Bay of Bengal.

Both countries had declared that they would apply all effective means to conserve the heritage of the Sundarban. Accordingly, they adopted the 77 million US Dollar India-Bangladesh Sundarban Biodiversity Conservation Project in 2004. However, at that time both countries were planning to extract hydrocarbons from the Sundarban.

News have now widely circulated that India will unilaterally extract oil and gas from its portion of the Sundarban with effect from January next year. The Indian Government has concluded an agreement with the Indian Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC). The chairman and managing director of ONGC said in a press conference on 19 August that the ONGC will start drilling near the coast of the Bay of Bengal about 150 km from the Sundarban.

The India-Bangladesh Sundarban Biodiversity Conservation Project has proved useless, since it has not shown any reaction to this unilateral declaration by India.

Indian environmental scientists have warned that Bangladesh will not be the only loser if India extracts hydrocarbons from the Sundarban --India will also suffer environmental disaster. As Ashraf-ul-Alam Tutu, Coordinator of Save Sundarban Campaign said, "the people of the world have proof that whenever hydrocarbon exploration has been conducted in a mangrove forest, environmental disaster has been the result."

Article based on information from: "India to extract hydrocarbons in Sundarban from January", Shaun Haque in Dainik Prabartan, Khulna, Sunday 12 September 2004, sent by Save Sundarban Campaign, e-mail: cdp@khulna.bangla.net