

Coal fires up India's farmers against new power plants

AFP, Poinad, India

Rajni Ramakan Patil has a message for the energy companies that want to build coal-based power stations on the land that she and two generations of her family have farmed for more than 50 years.

"Even if you give us gold, we won't leave this place. This is our land," she said.

Rajni and five other families from the village of Poinad cultivate a small parcel of land on the flat and fertile plains near the coastal town of Alibag, about 130 kilometres (80 miles) south of the western city of Mumbai.

The land, used for sowing rice crops and growing vegetables like okra and white onions, is among 8,500 acres (3,400 hectares) earmarked for the construction of four giant thermal power plants.

Activists opposed to the development fear it could destroy the livelihoods of thousands of people in the area, pollute the clean air and soil and create health problems among the poor farmers and their families.

"They only know how to sow, how to manage fields, how to harvest, how to fish," said Satish Londhe, who is spearheading the villagers' fight against the proposals.

The situation in the lush foothills of the Western Ghats mountain range embodies the problem facing India: how does it meet the increasing demand for energy as the country's population explodes and economic growth continues.

According to the International Energy Agency, more than half of the world's energy demands by 2030 will come from India and its fellow emerging economic powerhouse China.

But while China was reportedly building two new power stations per week, India's energy infrastructure has struggled to keep pace with rapid growth.

Some 400 million people currently lack regular electricity and even where it is available power cuts can be daily occurrences.

Maharashtra Energy Generation Ltd, a unit of India's largest private utility firm Reliance Energy Ltd, Tata Power and the other companies involved in the proposed plants say the 7,700 megawatts produced will ease supply problems.

The villagers and environ-

mentalists supporting them accept the need for more electricity but question whether coal is the answer.

With concern about high levels of greenhouse gas emissions from the burning of fossil fuels, they want renewable energy, which currently supplies about 25 percent of India's electricity, to be given greater priority.

According to Greenpeace India, wind, solar and tidal power could provide up to 35 percent of the country's power by 2030, with less environmental damage and social consequences.

"People don't want the project," said Vishnu Mhatre, a medical doctor who runs a clinic near the proposed power plant sites. "They want change but they don't want pollution."

"They want electricity but electricity can be provided by wind or other renewables."

But India -- the world's third-biggest producer of electricity from fossil fuel -- appears set on coal, which at present provides just under 55 percent of the country's power.

The ministry overseeing the industry maintains that coal will continue to take "centre stage of India's energy scenario" in the years to come, calling it a "unique ecofriendly fuel service to (the) domestic energy market."

Retired Admiral L. Ramdas, a former chief of the Indian naval staff, lives in Alibag with his wife, Lalita, who sits on the board of directors of Greenpeace International.

He called for more use of wind power and energy storage and described the potential displacement of thousands of farmers at a time of chronic food shortages in some parts of rural India as a "crazy, crazy situation."

The fight between India's famed "common man" and at least two of its biggest corporate beasts might seem unevenly matched, but there is a precedent for a victory against the odds.

Proposals for another power plant in the southern state of Karnataka were shelved after popular protests.

"Even a project delayed is a limited victory," said Ramdas. "We will carry on. We will wear them out. They won't wear us out."

Khaleda's bail

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year filed the case with Ramna Police Station.

The apex court asked the government to take steps to have the rule disposed of at the HC as early as possible.

Barrister Rafique-Ul-Huq appeared for Khaleda, while Additional Attorney General AKM Zahurul Haque stood for the government.

Transport strike

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end to operation of unauthorised vehicles on the highways of Kushtia, Meherpur, Jhenidah, Chuadanga, Magura and Rajbari.

Sources said the association leaders agreed to withdraw the strike after Seikh Hemayat Hossain, deputy inspector general (DIG) of police Khulna range, had assured them of meeting their demands.

After the withdrawal, road communication resumed at about 5:00pm yesterday.

Kushtia Bus-Truck Owners' Association President Zahir Uddin Ahmed Bablu confirmed the withdrawal of the strike after the meeting held at the DIG office.

The transport owners earlier demanded that the authorities ban vehicles run by shallow engines. Such vehicles locally known as Nasimon, Karimon, Alam Sadhu and Ram Bangla often cause road accidents, they claimed.

Transportation between southwestern and northern regions and also between Dhaka and aforesaid districts has been disrupted as the association leaders stopped the vehicles to operate on the road during the strike.

"We had to call the strike as we have been suffering by the menace for long," said Saidul Anam Mintu, general secretary of Jhenidah Bus-Truck Owners' Association.

Faisal Morshed

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before the court in presence of his lawyers and sought bail.

The prosecution mentioned, during the hearing, trial court has no jurisdiction to grant bail to anyone convicted exceeding one year.

However, Faisal's lawyers also submitted two more petitions -- one for giving him with first class division and another for proper treatment in jail. The court ordered the authority to allocate him facilities as per jail code.

On August 20 last year, Judge AKM Arifur Rahman of the Special Court-10 sentenced Faisal Morshed Khan to eight years' imprisonment for amassing wealth illegally from unknown sources of income and two years' imprisonment concealing information in his wealth statement submitted to the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC).

ACC Assistant Director Talebor Rahman filed the case against Faisal, managing director of Pacific Motors and chairman of AB Bank Ltd, and his wife with Gulshan Police Station on December 10 last year for amassing wealth worth Tk 1.66 crore and hiding information about wealth worth Tk 1.50 crore.

The court had also ordered confiscation of Faisal's ill-gotten wealth worth Tk 1.66 crore.

Earlier on April 13, another special court gave Faisal seven years in jail for aiding and abetting Shahjahan Chowdhury, a former Jamaat lawmaker, in committing crimes and amassing wealth illegally.

The case was filed against them with Chittagong Bandar Police Station in July 2007, but it was later shifted to Dhaka for its trial.

Faisal returned country from Singapore yesterday and appeared before the court on a wheel chair.

BDR jawan dies

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Medical College Hospital morgue for autopsy.

OC of the police station said Shahid was not accused in the mutiny case.

BDR Public Relations Officer Muhammad Muhasin Reza told The Daily Star that Shahid, hailing from Mithanala village of Mirersarai upazila in Chittagong district, was recently transferred to the mechanical department of the headquarters from the BDR Company in Khulna.

SI Abdul Aziz of the police station said they recovered the body following the complaint lodged by another BDR havilder Azadur Rahman.

Quoting Azad, SI Aziz said Shahid and Azad were working in the BDR workshop along with their colleagues and at about 8:30am, Shahid complained of chest pain and was soon admitted to the BDR hospital.

Shahid died shortly afterwards, Azad added.

Afghan peace talks must be 'all-inclusive'

Says top UN officials

AFP, Kabul

Talks with the Taliban aimed at fostering peace in Afghanistan must be "all-inclusive" and target the political structure of the insurgent movement, the top UN official here said.

Possible negotiations with the Islamist hardliners, who are waging an increasingly fierce insurgency to regain power, have topped the agenda in the run up to presidential elections here on August 20.

Foreign powers have weighed in, with differing opinions over whether the government should sit down with only mid-level Taliban commanders, or try to target the top leadership who have alleged links to Al-Qaeda.

"If you only have a partial reconciliation process you'll have a partial result," Kai Eide, head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), told reporters in Kabul.

"If you do want a comprehensive peace process, it is not enough to talk to com-

manders on the ground. It is a political process. I think you also have to approach the more political structures of the insurgency movement," he added.

In earlier comments published in Britain's Sunday Times newspaper, Eide said: "We have to have a political process that is all-inclusive. That's the only way to bring this conflict to an end."

Britain's Foreign Minister David Miliband said last week that talks should target moderate Taliban "who can be reconciled to live within the Afghan constitution."

US officials have also been cautious about backing talks with Taliban leaders accused of sheltering Al-Qaeda figures blamed for the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

Eide told reporters gathered in Kabul that he gave the Sunday Times interview before Miliband's speech, but said his approach "is more comprehensive than that you see from some others."

Fertiliser distribution

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smuggling of the subsidised agricultural input, stakeholders said.

Earlier, dealers at upazila level engaged their agents in the distribution of fertiliser. In some cases, the government assigned dealers at specific union parishes, said dealers.

Under the new policy, retailers will be assigned on recommendation of a selection committee at the union parishad level.

The committee, comprised of union parishad representatives, two influential locals, an imam of a mosque, a teacher and an official of Department of Agricultural Extension, will determine the number of fertiliser retailers at each union parishad and make recommendations to the Upazila Fertiliser and Seed Monitoring Committee.

Identity cards for retailers have been made mandatory to ensure transparency in the distribution system.

One has to apply to the Upazila Fertiliser and Seed Monitoring Committee to become a retailer. The committee then will issue an identity card based on the selection committee's recommendation.

New militant outfit

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However, the law enforcers could not know anything about the leadership and detailed activities of Jamaat-e-Muslimeen from Mizan, but they suspect that the organisation is carrying out invitational activities under the banner of Dawat-e-Islam at different mosques in the capital.

"Many JMB members we have arrested in recent times told us that they were members of Dawat-e-Islam and were first inspired in jihadi spirit through its activities. They later joined JMB," said a top official of a law enforcement agency.

JMB is responsible for carrying out a number of deadly bomb and grenade attacks including the country-wide synchronised bomb attacks in 2005.

Dawat-e-Islam is on the list of 33 militant organisations the law enforcement agencies have identified either for having direct involvement in militant activities or for suspected involvement in militancy in the country.

Apart from JMB, the government has so far banned three other Islamist militant organisations--Harkatul Jihad al Islami, Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh, and Shahadat-e-Hikmah.

The other listed outfits are Hizb-ut Towhid, Allah Dal, Islami Samaj, Al Harat al Islamiya, Jama'atul Faliya, Towhidi Janata, Biswa Islami Front, Jama'atul al Sadat, Shahadat-e-Nabuwat, Jama'at-e-Yahia al Turat, Jalsh-e-Mostafa Bangladesh, Al Jihad Bangladesh, Warat Islamic Front, Jamaat-as-Sadat, Al Khidmat, Harkat-e-Islam al Jihad, Hizbullah Islami Samaj, Muslim Millat Sharia Council, World Islamic Front for Jihad, Jalsh-e-Mohammad, Hizbul Mahadi, Kalamur Dawat,

None but the dealer and the retailers having identity cards will be allowed to sell fertiliser.

"The new system will reduce farmers' sufferings by making fertilisers available at grassroots level," said Kafil Uddin Ahmed, chief adviser to the Bangladesh Fertiliser Association (BFA).

Under the policy, a three-tier body with District Fertiliser and Monitoring Committee at its top will monitor the overall supply and demand of fertiliser, its price and activities of dealers.

Committees at district and upazila levels will also be reconstituted with lawmakers, upazila chairmen, farmers, dealers, businessmen, journalists, government officials and law enforcers.

Two representatives from Bangladesh Rifles will be included in committees for border districts.

Uttam Deb, head of research of Centre for Policy Dialogue, said the latest government initiative would help farmers get fertilisers according to their needs.

It's a good initiative. But its success will depend on adequate supply of fertiliser, he added.

Khatami aides among prominent Iranians on trial

AFP, Tehran

Prominent Iranian reformists, including former aides to ex-president Mohammad Khatami, are on trial in Iran on charges of undermining national security following June's disputed presidential poll.

Following are thumbnail portraits of some of the key defendants who are among more than 100 people put on trial before a Tehran revolutionary court Saturday on charges of rioting and plotting to launch a "velvet revolution" after the June re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Most backed former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi in the election.

Mohammad Ali Abtahi, one of the first defendants to testify, is a former chief of staff for Khatami who later served as vice-president in charge of parliamentary affairs from 2001 to 2005.

Abahi, who had backed defeated candidate and former parliamentary speaker Mehdi Karubi in the June 12 election, told the court he should not have taken part in protests as there was no poll rigging. He also accused Khatami of treason.

Abdollah Ramezanzadeh, who is of Kurdish origin, was Khatami's government spokesman from 2001 to 2005. He is also vice-president of the Islamic Iran Participation Front, a reformist body set up by Khatami supporters in 1997.

Mohsen Mirdamadi is secretary general of the Islamic Iran Participation Front and a member of another prominent reformist group, the Organisation of the Mujahedeen of the Islamic Revolution. He was also president of parliament's foreign affairs commission from 1999 to 2003.

Behzad Nabavi was a former economy minister in the government of former prime minister Mir Hossein Mousavi during the 1980s when Iran was at war with Iraq. He is also widely considered the theorist of the reform movement in Iran and a former deputy speaker of parliament from 1999-2003.

Mohsen Aminzadeh was deputy foreign minister in Khatami's government and considered the former president's "man" within the ministry.

Mohsen Safaie-Farahani,

Energy crisis

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depending on the Bangladesh Bank governor. Let us see what he does."

Earlier, Rashed Moudud Khan, president of the ceramic association, presented their 10-point demand to the finance minister.

The demands include giving them bank loan at seven per cent interest, inclusion of ceramic sector in the government's stimulus package and waiver of VAT on gas bill.

Shift houses

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For financing the programme, assistance was sought alongside the government allocation from UNDP donor agencies including Asian Development Bank (ADB) and private NGOs.

Deputy Commissioner Mizanur Rahman told the meeting that seven private NGOs have been given the responsibility to prepare lists of those who have built houses in the risky areas on the slopes of the hills. Effective steps in this regard would be taken after their reports are available.

The meeting directed the UNOs of upazilas concerned to run mobile courts to stop habitation on the slopes of hills, use of forest resources in the brick kilns and tobacco processing plants.

Councillor of Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council Shafiqur Rahman, Councillor of Hill District Council Kazi Mujibur Rahman, upazila chairmen and UNOs, municipal mayor and representatives of donor agencies and development agencies were present at the meeting presided over by Bandarban Deputy Commissioner Mizanur Rahman.

The meeting decided to undertake extensive forestation in erosion-prone areas of Lama upazila under the supervision of government forest department in the current season to prevent erosion in the hills.

who is also a member of the Islamic Iran Participation Front, was deputy minister of economy under Khatami and a former member of parliament.

Mohammad Atrianfar is a member of the reformist Executives of Construction group which was founded by allies of former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and is also considered close to Khatami. A journalist by trade he helped launch the Hamshahri newspaper in the 1990s, and Shargh daily in 2003 but the authorities shut it down a few months later.

At Saturday's hearing, Atrianfar expressed his loyalty to the Iranian regime and like Abtahi apologised for his actions. Unlike Abtahi, all the defendants backed Mousavi in the election.

Huji men

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The arrestees are Abul Khair of Manikganj, Maulana Mohammad Musa of Chandpur, Abdul Aziz of Feni, Rezaul Karim and Anwar Uddin Javed of Chakaria in Cox's Bazar, and Abdullah Al Hossain of Banshkhal in Chittagong.

Abdul Aziz is a land broker while others are either madrasa teachers or imams of mosques.

Rab officials said the Huji men were taken back to the areas where they were arrested and that they will be produced before the courts concerned today.

The arrestees will also be taken on remand for interrogation about the latest activities of Huji.

These six Huji members were among the 41 militants who had been arrested with firearms and grenades at a Huji den in the deep forest of Ukhaia in Cox's Bazar on February 19, 1996.

Accused in a case filed in this connection, all 41 were convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1998.

Five of the accused--Abu Zafar, Aminur Rahman, Abu Abbas, Abdul Mannan and Abu Sufian--are already behind bars.

Reading out a written statement at the press briefing, Rab Additional Director General Col Mizanur Rahman Khan said the six arrestees were freed on bail from the higher court in December 2002.

Rab sources said 15 other accused fled the country following the announcement of the sentence. Other fugitives include Myanmarese citizen and Huji leader Nurul Islam and Abu Jehad who founded the militant organisation Islami Jihad Andolon in 2005 after leaving Huji.

British MPs

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not necessarily be replicated elsewhere within the army and ISI," it added.

The report welcomed Zardari's recent remarks that he regards terrorism rather than India the real threat to his country.

"However, we further conclude that doubts remain as to whether the underlying fundamentals of Pakistani security policy have changed sufficiently to realise the goals of long-term security and stability in Afghanistan," it added.

Lord Mark Malloch-Brown offered a similar view to the committee.

He said, "We are convinced that [the ISI] is on board institutionally, and that the leaderships of both the army and the ISI are supportive of the president and his strategy, which is reflected through the meetings that we have had with (Chief of Army Staff) General Kayani."

"There is a difficulty, that within the ISI there may remain individuals who have some sympathy with these groups," said Malloch-Brown, a respected minister.

The Foreign Affairs Committee said, "President Zardari's comments at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (in June) as well as his recent remarks to the effect that terrorism, not India, was now seen by Pakistan as the greater threat, while welcome, do not dispel the suspicion that a large part of his country's security establishment continues to be fixated on India and on the possibility of a future military conflict between the two countries."

JS body to probe

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With violence spreading to educational institutions in the capital and elsewhere, the then caretaker government imposed a curfew in the divisional cities and shut down the universities and colleges there on August 22.

Security personnel on August 24 picked up five teachers--two from DU and three from Rajshahi University--and took them to unspecified places for interrogation.

Earlier on August 21, the administration ordered withdrawal of the army camp from the DU campus, and a judicial probe into the violence that left over 250 people, mostly students, injured in two days.

The government pledged that actions would be taken against those responsible for the incidents.

At the briefing yesterday, Menon said they were surprised to know that the education ministry has no documents except that of teachers' convictions and exemption of sentences.

He said since their convictions stand, the teachers and students have difficulty getting visas. Some had already been denied visas.

The trial was staged-managed, and the real culprits got off scot-free, Menon observed.

Replying to a query, he said they would decide on the next course of action after examining available documents and the inquiry report and interviewing teachers and students.

He said they want to let people know actually what had happened that day on

the gymnasium ground that also housed the army camp.

Menon said teachers and students of DU and other universities had been subjected to excruciating torture by the military intelligence officials.

Some have been left to live with disabilities caused by the torture, he continued. "Such barbarism is rare to find in last 22 years."

He said a number of teachers have appealed to the parliamentary standing committee to investigate the events afresh.

He said the committee attaches great importance to the teachers' appeal. "We want to settle the matter once and for all to prevent repeat of such incidents. And in doing so, we will consider the legal, moral and ethical aspects of the issue."

At its next meeting, the committee will fix the dates for interviewing the teachers and students.

On a different note, Menon said a four-member sub-committee headed by Shah Alam has been assigned to probe allegations of corruption in examination inspection and activities of the education ministry's audit department.

The committee has been asked to report back in two months.

The chairman said the National Curriculum and Textbook Board believes it will be able to complete printing of 21 crore textbooks for the next academic session in time.

Committee members Kazi Faruq Kader, Biren Shikdar and Shah Alam were present at the press briefing.