

## Coal fires up India's farmers against new power plants

AFP, Poindia, 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 Poindia 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 powerplants.

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 Satis Londe, 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-

## JS body to probe

With violence spreading to educational institutions in the capital and elsewhere, the 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.

Replies 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 press briefing.

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"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 fabled "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.

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