

LEGAL CHALLENGE TO POWER PROJECT

Indian state to seek consent from locals

REUTERS, Mumbai

The Indian state of Himachal Pradesh has withdrawn a court petition challenging the right of indigenous people to oppose a power plant on forest land, ending a seven-year tussle that highlighted the fight for land in the country.

Himachal Pradesh Power Corporation, a state enterprise, had appealed against an order by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) directing it to seek consent from four village councils for the hydroelectric project, in accordance with the Forest Rights Act. The case was due to be heard in the Supreme Court yesterday.

The petition had said that the order was not practical, as indigenous people were unskilled and incapable of taking informed decisions on technical matters.

India's Forest Rights Act of 2006 gives indigenous people and forest dwellers the right to manage and govern their traditional forests and resources. Any infrastructure or development project that requires forest land to be cleared needs the consent of the gram sabha, or village council.

"We have to move away from the idea of the gram sabha as illiterate people plotting to derail development," environment lawyer Ritwick Dutta, representing community organisations against Himachal Pradesh, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"Around the world, free and prior

informed consent of communities is being seen as necessary for businesses," he said.

The village councils in Kinnaur in the northern Indian state had said they were concerned about environmental damage from the power project. Activists said the area, known for growing apples, was fragile and that the plant could ruin livelihoods.

The state's petition was seen as an embarrassment for the opposition Congress party, which controls the state government.

The party, which had passed the Forest Rights Act when it was in power, has criticised the current federal government for its weak implementation of the law.

"The Congress party has always recognised the rights of gram sabhas ... for the protection of forest rights," a spokesman said, explaining why Himachal Pradesh had decided to drop the case on Thursday.

"Withdrawal of the petition by the state government is a testament to this commitment," he said.

Conflicts over land in India have increased as one of the world's fastest growing major economies expands, and land is sought for industrial use and development projects.

While several laws have been introduced in the past decade to protect the rights of farmers and indigenous people, some laws have been diluted in their implementation and not always helped the vulnerable, activists say.

Hajj begins today

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holy Kaaba at the Grand Mosque in Makkah, in a procession that continues day and night.

It is one of the first rites of the pilgrimage, which is among the largest religious gatherings in the world.

The hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam, which capable Muslims must perform at least once, marking the spiritual peak of their lives.

Rich and poor alike come dressed in the same white garments.

"I feel no fear at all," said Adil Abdulrahman, a British pilgrim confident that authorities have tried to make the faithful feel safe.

A Nigerian visitor, Lawan Nasir, 45, said the loss of a cousin in last year's stampede did not stop him from coming.

"The pains have not dulled a bit," he told AFP, but it would be "silly" to stay away.

"Death will come when it will come and nothing can save one from its claws."

In one of several safety measures implemented after the stampede, access to the Kaaba -- a black cube that Muslims across the globe face while they pray -- is suspended during prayers, and the walk around it is stopped to avoid overcrowding.

The Saudi Gazette yesterday quoted mosque officials as saying the circumambulation area has been expanded to hold about 30,000 pilgrims an hour, up from 19,000.

Security has also been reinforced around Islam's holiest site, with officers in red berets and camouflage uniforms manning green plastic barricades to control the crowd.

During the main weekly Friday prayers, the white-clad throng made the area around the Kaaba resemble a snow-dusted field from above.

A helicopter flew overhead and main roads in the city were shut to allow hundreds of thousands of pedestrians access.

With temperatures of 43 Celsius (110 Fahrenheit) as they marched, some pilgrims seemed faint. They

carried water and tried to help each other under the unyielding sun.

'ABSENCE OF TRANSPARENCY'

The kingdom has begun issuing pilgrims with identification bracelets, after some foreign officials expressed concern about difficulties in identifying the stampede dead.

Each bracelet carries a bar code readable by smartphone. It indicates the pilgrim's identity, nationality, place of lodging in Makkah, as well as other information, the vice secretary of the ministry of hajj and umrah, Issa Rawas, told AFP.

"The aim is to equip all pilgrims" from abroad, who are expected to number more than 1.4 million, he said.

Local media say more than 300,000 faithful from inside Saudi Arabia are also expected.

Zakou Bakar, 50, a pilgrim from Niger, said the bracelet was reassuring.

"If I die or if there are problems -- of course we hope not -- but if it does happen I know I will be identified," he told AFP.

Jane Kinninmont, deputy head of the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House, a London think-tank, said the stampede exposed "clearly some big organisational failings, to say the least."

There was also "an absence of real transparency" about what went wrong, she said.

Saudi Arabia also has an economic stake in pilgrims.

As part of efforts to diversify its oil-dependent economy, it wants to foster a year-round religious tourism sector relying on those who perform the umrah, or lesser pilgrimage, at any time of the year.

It targets 15 million umrah visitors annually by 2020, up from six million.

Absent from this year's hajj will be tens of thousands of Iranian pilgrims after talks between Tehran and Riyadh on logistics and security fell apart in May.

Iran said 464 nationals died in last year's crush, the largest number of dead by nationality.



Hundreds of buses wait for ferries at Paturia ferry terminal in Manikganj yesterday.

PHOTO: ZAHANGIR SHAH

Tailbacks take toll on holidaymakers

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hours in scorching heat, were aggravated by unavailability of washrooms and baby foods.

Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader blamed lack of discipline as one of the main reasons behind traffic congestion on highways.

"Our main problem is lack of discipline on roads. Nobody has patience. Vehicles run on the wrong side, which worsens traffic congestion on highways," he told reporters after inaugurating an underpass in Shorabo area of Gazipur.

He warned ministers, lawmakers and VIPs of legal action for driving vehicles on the wrong side.

"We cannot say for sure that people's journey home will be totally comfortable, but we will try our best," added the minister.

The picture at Gabtoli Bus Terminal was similar to what it was on Thursday. Passengers suffered as buses got delayed for four to five hours. Transport operators blamed it on tailbacks on highways.

Bus services from Dhaka to southwestern districts faced problems as buses couldn't reach their destinations on time because of disruption to ferry service at Paturia.

"We arrived here at 7:00am and were scheduled to leave for Chuadanga

at 8:00am. But the departure was delayed and we finally boarded the bus at 4:00pm," said Md Prince, who along with his family members, was waiting at Darshana Deluxe counter at Gabtoli.

"Only God knows when we will reach home," he said.

Buses going to southern districts had to wait in queues at ferry terminals for several hours to cross the Padma river. Thousands of people remained stuck on Dhaka-Aricha highway for hours either for traffic congestion or unavailability of ferries at Paturia.

DHAKA-TANGAIL HIGHWAY

Excessive flow of traffic to the northern districts caused vehicles to move slowly on Dhaka-Tangail highway.

Home-goers suffered terribly due to long tailbacks at different points on the highway.

Traffic movement there was quite smooth before the Juma prayers. But the situation changed following a rise in traffic flow that resulted in tailbacks at different points from Gorai in Mirzapur upazila to Natiapara in Basail upazila, said highway police officials.

Mohammad Moeen Uddin, a passenger of a Tangail-bound bus from the capital, said he started from Kalyanpur around 6:00am and

reached Tangail at 1:00pm.

"The bus remained stuck for four hours in tailbacks in Chandra, Board Ghar, Cadet College, Hatubhanga, Gorai, Sohagpara, Deohata, Mirzapur, Dhalla, Pakulla, Jamurki and Natiapara areas," he said.

Mahbub Alam, superintendent of police in Tangail, visited the highway and gave instructions to policemen to take necessary steps to ease traffic jam.

He told this newspaper that vehicles were moving a bit slowly on the highway due to an increased flow of vehicles, including cattle-laden trucks.

"Law enforcers are trying their best to keep the traffic flow normal. The overall situation is better than that of the last two days," said the SP.

TAILBACK AT PATURIA GHAT

Hundreds of buses, trucks and other vehicles were stuck in a five-km-long tailback up to Paturia ferry terminal in the evening, reports our local correspondent.

Fourteen of the 19 ferries were carrying vehicles from all four ghats, but those failed to cope with the additional number of vehicles, said sources at Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC).

Strong current in the river also slowed down the movement of ferries, they added.

Passengers had to wait up to 10

hours at the ghat.

Mrinalini, who works at a private firm, left Dhaka for Khulna along with her husband and two children at 10:00pm on Thursday.

"Our bus reached Paturia around 3:45am [yesterday]. We are yet to board the ferry," she told our local correspondent around 2:00pm.

"I had brought extra food for my son and daughter, considering the long journey home. But those ran out in the morning," said Mrinalini, adding that she also bought some dry foods from roadside shops.

"The biggest problem I have faced is the unavailability of washrooms for women," she added.

SHIMULIA-KAWRAKANDI FERRY

Shimulia-Kawrakandi ferry service, which connects the capital with the southern part, also failed to handle the rising number of vehicles.

Hundreds of vehicles remained stranded at Shimulia end. Many people were seen crossing the mighty Padma by speedboats, risking their lives, reports our Munshiganj correspondent.

Mosharraf Hossain, who is in charge of Mawa police outpost, said around 70 buses, some trucks and around 400 other vehicles were waiting in a queue for ferry yesterday afternoon.

Risky trips on trains

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the Eid-ul-Fitr this year. The number of passengers has increased from Thursday, and the situation continues until today.

Though the railway did not think that delay in train operation at this moment was a big problem, passengers expressed their dissatisfaction with the delay.

Alauddin Ali, a passenger of Parbatipur Express, said he had been waiting at the station with his family for one and a half hour, but did not know when his train would arrive.

"It's very uncomfortable for passengers to wait for train for long in such hot weather, and it has become common during every Eid that railway cannot maintain its schedule," he added.

A passenger of Jamuna Express, Ima Reza, who was going to Jamalpur with her family, told The Daily Star that they knew that their journey would be troublesome. But travelling to the village home and spending Eid holidays with the family give her immense pleasure.

Asked about the delay, NC Saha, station master-2 of Kamalapur Railway Station, said a good number of passen-

gers were travelling by train, and the delay was caused due to boarding and offloading of passengers.

He said they always ask passengers not to climb on the train roof, but they ignore it.

The accident in Sirajganj occurred around 12:30pm when Khulna-bound Sundarban Express was crossing Bangabandhu bridge west zone railway station at Kodda, reports our Pabna correspondent.

Sayed Iqbal, officer-in-charge of Sirajganj GRP Police Station, said 15 of the 40 wounded were admitted to

Sirajganj General Hospital in a critical condition.

The railway authorities said they would take action against those who set up the wires illegally.

Our Gazipur correspondent adds, a huge number of people were seen climbing on the train roofs by using ladders.

About 10,000 to 12,000 passengers boarded trains at Chittagong Railway Station regularly, but during the Eid, their number rose to around 18,000, said Chittagong Railway Station Manager Abul Kalam Azad.

Fury over North Korea nuke test

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would discuss the test at a closed-door meeting, at the request of the United States, Japan and South Korea.

Under 32-year-old dictator Kim Jong Un, North Korea has accelerated the development of its nuclear and missile programs, despite UN sanctions that were tightened in March and have further isolated the impoverished country.

South Korean President Park Geun-hye, in Laos after a summit of Asian leaders, said Kim was showing "maniacal recklessness" in completely ignoring the world's call to abandon his pursuit of nuclear weapons.

US President Barack Obama, aboard Air Force One on his way home from Laos, said the test would be met with "serious consequences", and held talks with Park and with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the White House said.

China said it was resolutely opposed to the test and urged Pyongyang to stop taking any actions that would worsen the situation. It said it would lodge a protest with the North Korean embassy in Beijing.

There were further robust condemnations from Russia, the European Union, Nato, Germany and Britain.

North Korea, which labels the South and the United States as its main enemies, said its "scientists and technicians carried out a nuclear explosion test for the judgment of the power of a nuclear warhead," according to its official KCNA news agency.

It said the test proved North Korea was capable of mounting a nuclear warhead on a medium-range ballistic missile, which it last tested on Monday when Obama and other world leaders were gathered in China for a G20 summit.

Pyongyang's claims of being able to miniaturise a nuclear warhead have never been independently verified.

Its continued testing in defiance of sanctions presents a challenge to Obama in the final months of his presidency and could become a factor in the US presidential election in November, and a headache to be inherited by whoever wins.

RADIATION MONITORING

North Korea's nuclear test has not affected current radiation levels in China, the state television broadcaster cited the country's environment ministry as saying yesterday on its official microblog.

Japan's nuclear regulator, the Nuclear Regulation Authority, said that

no irregularities had been detected as of 0430 GMT at about 300 Japanese radiation monitoring posts after North Korea's nuclear test.

Russian news agencies cited Anna Popova, the head of Russia's consumer safety watchdog Rospotrebnadzor, as saying that there had been no indication so far that nuclear test resulted in higher radiation levels in Russia's Far East.

South Korea's military put the force of the blast at 10 kilotons, which would still be the North's most powerful nuclear blast to date.

UNPRECEDENTED RATE

North Korea has been testing different types of missiles at an unprecedented rate this year, and the capability to mount a nuclear warhead on a missile is especially worrisome for its neighbours South Korea and Japan.

"The standardization of the nuclear warhead will enable the DPRK to produce at will and as many as it wants a variety of smaller, lighter and diversified nuclear warheads of higher strike power," KCNA said, referring to the country's formal name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

It was not clear whether Pyongyang had notified Beijing or Moscow of its planned nuclear test. Senior officials from Pyongyang were in both capitals

this week.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said she had no information to provide when asked if China had advance warning of the test, and would not be drawn on whether China would support tougher sanctions against its neighbour.

Although Beijing has criticised North Korea's nuclear and missile tests, it has repeatedly expressed anger since the United States and South Korea decided in July to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system in the South.

China calls THAAD a threat to its own security and will do nothing to bring North Korea back to the negotiating table on its nuclear program.

Preliminary data collected by the Vienna-based Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO), which monitors nuclear tests around the world, indicates the magnitude - around 5 - of the seismic event detected in North Korea yesterday was greater than a previous one in January.

Jeffrey Lewis of the California-based Middlebury Institute of International Studies said the highest estimates of seismic magnitude suggested this was North Korea's most powerful nuclear test so far.

Radicalised abroad

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recently, and found names of five radicalised Bangladeshi youths who studied at the university.

One of the five was Nibras Islam. He was also among the militants killed in a commando operation launched to end the July 1 Gulshan café siege.

The militants butchered 20 hostages, mostly foreigners, by the time commandoes stormed the upscale eatery in the city's diplomatic zone.

The five Monash youths also include Tausif Hossain, who was killed along with "Neo JMB" coordinator Tamim Ahmed Chowdhury in a police raid in Narayanganj on August 27.

The three others -- Raiyan Minhaz, Salvi Ali and Shabab Masroor Salauddin -- are accused in a case filed with Shahbagh Police Station on February 9 under Anti-Terrorism Act. Nibras was also an accused in the case.

Police have identified some other students radicalised at Monash. Their names remain undisclosed as they were not accused in any cases, officials say.

Sanwar Hossain, additional deputy commissioner of DMP's counterterrorism unit, said police are investigating those being engaged in militancy during their stay abroad for study or job. "We have interrogated some of them."

THE CHANGE

Before being radicalised, the students were sports enthusiasts and had female friends. They used to hang around and have fun, said a DMP official.

But they began to change mostly from mid-2014 and started refraining from such activities, police said based on accounts of some Monash students.

"Instead of saying hi and hello, they now greeted us in Islamic ways," a police official quoted a friend of a radicalised youth as saying.

At one stage, they asked their friends and fellow students to avoid girlfriends and female classmates. Holding group meetings, they used to watch videos of Islamic State and al-Qaeda, officials say.

The radicals left Monash and came back to Bangladesh last year -- some completed study while some didn't. They then tried to radicalise friends and family members in Dhaka.

Police said the youths were part of "Neo JMB", an offshoot of banned militant outfit Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB).

"Neo JMB", which follows the ideologies of Islamic State, is far more dangerous than the mainstream JMB, investigators say.

However, it is not clear exactly when the youths joined the militant group.