



PHOTO: NAAZ FAHMIDA

YES to Sundarbans NO to projects of environmental destruction

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If we say yes to the Sundarbans, then we must say no to the commercial projects harmful for its survival. Whether it is a power plant or any other commercial activity, whether it is foreign investment (FDI) or local investment, whether it is investment from India, or China or the US or any other country, even from Bangladesh, whether it increases the GDP or generates power – this position cannot be compromised. Because there are many alternatives to power generation and commercial activities, but there is not any alternative for the Sundarbans. There are many ways to increase the GDP but there is no way to reproduce the Sundarbans.

This hard truth keeps people alive in resistance against killing of our natural protector, our lungs, and the last of our forests. This year we have entered into the seventh year of our protests against the disastrous projects in the Sundarbans. Along with the National Committee, thousands of people at home and abroad have spontaneously engaged themselves in organising protests that have intensified in recent months. Regrettably, the 1320 MW Rampal coal fired power plant project has become a centre of attraction for other harmful business in and around the Sundarbans. Therefore, it is urgent to scrap the project before it is too late.

The Sundarbans and the project

The Sundarbans, extraordinarily rich in biodiversity, the largest single tract mangrove forest, and a UNESCO natural world heritage site, is intersected by a network of tidal canals, creeks and rivers. More than 4 million people depend on the Sundarbans for their livelihoods. This has also been a huge natural safeguard against frequent cyclone, storm and other natural dis-

asters in the country. Lives and properties of nearly 50 million people will be threatened if there is no Sundarbans. Therefore the Rampal coal fired power plant will actually bring disaster for millions of humans and other non-human lives.

From the very beginning, the project has been suffering from serious shortcomings. The government had selected a natural wetland and fertile agricultural land for the project. Land acquisition order for this power plant was issued on December 27, 2010 – more than two years before the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) was done. Before the EIA was approved, the joint venture agreement to set up the power plant was signed between the Indian company NTPC and Bangladesh Power Development Board (PDB) on January 29, 2012. A public consultation was arranged by PDB on April 12, 2013. The experts, invited for the consultation, identified serious problems with the EIA; they rejected the EIA and asked the government to stop all activities before another independent EIA was conducted. However, a week later the final agreement was signed by defying that rejection.

In the meantime, more than 3500 landowning families submitted complaints about unlawful acquisition of their land: the police and local thugs were involved in forceful eviction. Many of them did not get the promised compensation. Nearly 8 thousand families are going to be displaced in the process; most affected have been the poor people and the minority communities. A recent investigative report reveals that around two-thirds of the land acquired by the government from the locals has been handed over to local leaders and highly linked people. One such leader proudly claimed that they played a key

role when the land was acquired for the plant, also stopped the groups of “bandits” who staged movements and long march against the power plant! (*Dhaka Tribune*, January 31, 2017)

Major risks

Independent experts from home and abroad have pointed out many aspects of the threats to the Sundarbans. UNESCO, South Asians for Human Rights, Institute for Energy Economics

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and Financial Analysis, among others, have made independent studies and reached the same conclusion: the project will be disastrous for the Sundarbans.

Although the Indian EIA guideline 2010 disallows setting up of similar projects within 25 km of ecologically

sensitive areas including forests, rivers, and sanctuaries, the site of Rampal coal fired power plant is located on the north of the Sundarbans, only 14 km away from its boundary. This site is only 2 metres above the sea level; it falls within a tidal delta region which has experienced surge as high as height of 5 meters and witnessed 16 cyclones in the past 25 years.

The plant will annually consume 4.72 million tonnes of coal that will be transported to the project site through the waterways of the Sundarbans (nearly 13 thousand tonnes per day) with serious risk of “coal spillage, ballast water, bilge water, oil spillage, lubricant, and garbage”. The current transportation system in the Sundarbans area itself is creating severe sound and water pollution around the forest ecology. The latest accident took place in January when a vessel sunk with 1000 tonnes of coal. This is the latest of series of disasters. The inadequate response of the government to these accidents increases the risks of coal transportation. (See for details: <https://waterkeeper.org/coal-barge-carrying-1000-tonnes-of-coal-sinks-in-the-sundarbans-world-heritage-site/>)

To run the power plant, water of the Passur River will be withdrawn (at the rate of 9,150 cubic m/hour) and discharged (at the rate of 5,150 cubic m/hour) into it again after use with a varying temperature. Experts warn that this will reduce the oxygen of the water and damage the fish stocks of the Passur. The rising temperature will also affect the “entire ecosystem and biodiversity of the forest, the marine ecology and the biodiversity of the Passur would be destroyed, as well as the hydrological characteristics of the river including its salinity front, salinity

level, sedimentation pattern, and tidal behaviour”. Discharged water will also contain a large amount of toxic mercury that will be released from the plant every year. This mercury will be mixed up with the food chain through water system.

Zoologists have shown concern that the toxic substances emitted from the coal-fired power plant including arsenic, lead, mercury, nickel, vanadium, beryllium, barium, cadmium, chromium, selenium, and radium are capable of contaminating the air and water to such an extent that it would affect the reproductive health system of the wild life animals and the species of the Sundarbans. Scientists are concerned that the coal-fired pollution will hamper the existence of rare species of birds in the forest.

Experts have also asserted that so-called “most modern” technology described in EIA is only capable of reducing pollution only 8 to 10 percent. Even if other pollutant reducing technologies are used, no record suggests that risk of pollution could be entirely eliminated. For instance, “the installation of FGD may reduce the risk of SO₂ pollution, while increasing the chances of water pollution through the release of heavy chemical materials including Arsenic, Mercury, Selenium and Boron.” (Cleansing the Air at the Expense of Waterways, *The New York Times*, Oct 12, 2009)

A Study on the project by the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis also found that the proposed Rampal power plant is “fraught with unacceptable risk, out of step with the times, and would set Bangladesh back”.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 26