

| ENVIRONMENT |

A draft resolution adopted as amended by the 41st Session of the UNESCO Heritage Committee contradicts the claim made by the foreign ministry that the Committee “endorsed” the construction of a coal-based power plant at Rampal near the Sundarbans, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

“After a long deliberation, the committee endorsed Bangladesh’s decision to construct Rampal power plant at its current location with necessary mitigation measures,” the ministry’s press release read.

Indian company Bharat Heavy Electricals won the contract to build the USD 1.7 million plant, with India’s state-owned company Coal India expected to supply four million tonnes of coal every year.

While the Committee softened its position in regard with many issues including the Rampal power plant, the amended draft adopted by the Committee neither mentions of any “endorsement” to the construction of the plant, nor does it fully repeal its concerns about the state of conservation of the Sundarbans, in general, and the plant, in particular.

The World Heritage Committee (WHC) consisting of representatives from 21 States Parties decides on the inclusion or deletion of properties on both the World Heritage List and the List of World Heritage in Danger. It monitors the state of conservation of inscribed properties, and asks the State Parties to take action when necessary.

Amidst the concerns expressed by the environmental activists, UNESCO in 2006 dispatched a joint World Heritage Centre/IUCN (WHC/IUCN) Reactive Monitoring team to the Sundarbans on a fact-finding mission. The expert team in its report made a number of recommendations, including one to stop building Rampal power plant.

At its 41st annual session, held in Krakow, Poland from July 2-12, the Committee was poised to relegate the Sundarbans to the List of World Heritage in Danger, or at least, threaten to do so at its next annual meeting if certain recommendations of fact-finding mission were not met.

It was also expected that the Committee would retain its call upon the government to relocate the plant out of Sundarbans and its nearby areas, as the mission had recommended.

However, Turkey’s intervention roughly changed the scenario.

In the initial draft decisions, the Committee had urged the government

“to not proceed further with implementation of the Rampal power plant in its current location.” It had also recommended that the Committee should consider inscribing the property, the Sundarbans, on the List of World Heritage in Danger at its next session if the state party did not make “substantial progress with the implementation.”

While adopting the draft decisions, the Committee softened the aforementioned texts, upon Turkey’s request. However, the Bangladesh government’s interpretation of the softening of those two texts as the Committee’s “endorsement” is unfounded.

At one part of the adopted text, for example, the Committee requests the State Party not to allow “any large-scale industrial and/or infrastructure developments” to proceed before a Strategic Environment Assessment (SEA)

has been submitted, but falls short of naming the Rampal project.

However, that didn’t stop Prime Minister’s Energy Advisor, Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury, from interpreting that UNESCO’s restriction is only applicable for “future” such projects, and that it doesn’t put the Rampal project on hold.

The foreign ministry statement also claimed that the WHC and IUCN withdrew their “earlier objections” to the construction of the Rampal power plant at its current location. “With the latest stance of UNESCO, the international debate over the coal-fired power plant has been resolved”, declared Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury, who also led Bangladesh team at the WHC session.

While it’s true that the draft text, in contrary to its earlier version, refrains from directly urging the government to not proceed with Rampal project, the concerns are still broadly stated.

The adopted draft states that the Committee “takes note of the mission’s concerns about the likely environmental impacts of the Rampal coal-fired power plant on the property arising from air and water pollution, a substantial increase in shipping and dredging, and additional removal of freshwater from an already increasingly saline environment.”

Another significant change was that the Committee completely repealed the text about the “possible inscription of the property [the Sundarbans] on the List of World Heritage in Danger.” It also extended the timeframe to December 2018 for Bangladesh to submit “an updated report on the state of conservation of the property and the implementation of the above.”

“It is necessary to reconcile two opposing views on Environmental Impact Assessment,” argued Ahmet Altay Cengizer, the Turkish delegate, explaining why he chose to intervene, highlighting differences in opinion between the WHC-IUCN and Bangladesh government.

“It is not clear why the Centre-IUCN conclusions deny sufficient time to the state party for completing the SEA, as required by the committee’s previous decision, and insist on taking pre-emptive measures by halting all infrastructure development work in the area without seeing the results of the SEA.”

Finland, another member state, also made a proposal, which “requests furthermore that the state party to put in place a management system for shipping to minimise negative impact on the property including from associated activities such as dredging.”

The World Heritage Committee included Sundarbans in the World Heritage List in 1997, given its universal value as a unique ecosystem. However, the Committee in recent years expressed its concern over the state of conservation of the world’s largest mangrove forest, citing a number of reasons, including the decision by Bangladesh government to construct a coal-based power plant at Rampal.

Zia Hassan, a development expert and political commentator, summarised it best on a long note on Facebook, “UNESCO has adopted the resolution with two significant changes, which soften the tone of the highly critical draft by request of Turkey but have not endorsed the project as claimed by the foreign ministry.”

*Nazmul Ahasan is a freelance Journalist*



## DID UNESCO REALLY “ENDORSE” RAMPAL COAL PLANT?

NAZMUL AHASAN

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