

India: Deaths in West Bengal during protest against new industrial project

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As protests by farming communities fearing displacement from their land as a result of a new industrial project continue to lead to violence in West Bengal (Eastern India), Amnesty International is concerned at reports that state officials may be responsible for, or complicit in, human rights abuses including torture and the death or injury of protestors following the use of excessive and unnecessary force.

At least seven people were reported killed and at least 20 others injured since 7 January in continuing violence in Nandigram, Eastern Midnapore district, West Bengal where farmers are protesting an initiative by the Bengal state government to acquire land for a new industrial project. Among those killed was a 14-year-old boy.

Violent clashes in Nandigram reportedly involved members of the local Krishjami Raksha Committee (Save Farmland Committee) and persons linked to the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), which leads West Bengal's Left Front government and is seeking to accelerate the development of industrial projects in the state.

Human rights organisations allege that the farmers were attacked by armed men affiliated to the CPI-M acting in complicity with the police. The reports say the attackers fired at the farmers and branded some of them with hot iron rods as "punishment" for protesting against the industrial project. There have been reports of farmers carrying out attacks on local CPI-M offices in the area, forcing them to flee elsewhere.

In this context, Amnesty International urges the Government of West Bengal to:

- order an impartial and independent inquiry into the Nandigram violence, promptly make the findings public and prosecute those accused of violence;
- ensure that all state officials, including police personnel, who are suspected of being responsible for human rights violations, including excessive use of force, torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment are prosecuted;

- release those detained without any specific criminal charges at Nandigram and ensure that activists and other individuals engaged in peaceful protests should be able to do so without fear of violence, harassment or false accusation of involvement in criminal activities.

Amnesty International believes that full consultations about the human rights impact of economic decisions with those to be affected are vital means through which human rights are safeguarded in the context of development. In this respect, the organisation calls on the Government of West Bengal to:

announce and implement a consistent policy of full consultation with local populations before any development which could affect their livelihood can take place and ensure that, where populations are resettled, there is just, adequate and culturally-sensitive rehabilitation, resettlement and reparation for those affected.

Background

Since 3 January 2007, Nandigram has witnessed protests by local farmers after they came to know about a notification issued by authorities at the neighbouring Haldia port identifying their lands as sites to be acquired for the new chemical production project. This notification has since been withdrawn by the West Bengal government which has stated it would “exercise caution” while going ahead with the project.

The project reportedly requires at least 4,000 hectares of land for setting up a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) which would be jointly developed as a chemical hub by the state-owned Industrial Development Corporation and the Indonesia-based Salem group of companies. Another SEZ promoted by the same group is also reportedly planned in the Haldia area.

The protests at Nandigram followed unrest in Singur (West Bengal) in December 2006, when opposition parties and a number of farmers threatened with displacement by a state government move to acquire farm land for a Tata Motors’ automobile manufacturing project prompted demonstrations. The West Bengal state government plans to set up at least six other major industrial projects, including SEZs, in the state, necessitating the acquiring of at least 10,000 hectares of land.

In a bid to boost national economic growth, India has been promoting SEZs across the country. The policy of acquiring land for such industrial projects has sparked protests from local communities fearing land displacement and threats to their sustainable livelihood.