

Janadesh News

2008 Volume 3

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QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

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SEZs: India's Special Economic Zones

Thousands of people who rely on agriculture for their livelihoods are feeling the impacts of India's Special Economic Zones (SEZs.) Whether it is through the loss of lands, the poisoning of waters or the violence inflicted on those who voice their opposition, SEZs have brought little more than pain and loss to rural communities all over the country. As the Government of India invests its time in the creation of policies that will lure foreign money into India, rural poverty, migration, farmer suicides and the destruction of lands and livelihoods are increasing at an alarming rate. The total area of SEZ land in India is estimated to be over 200,000 hectares, most of which is agricultural land capable of producing almost one million tones of food grains. As more and more agricultural lands are established as SEZs, food security in India is increasingly at risk. How can the government justify allotting thousands of hectares of agricultural lands to foreign companies when it means potentially risking the lives of so many citizens? The answer is money. As the number of SEZs in India increase the government claims that there will be improvements in industry, technology and export growth. The problem is not just the total lack of regard for the constitutional rights of India's people; it is also the fact that SEZs are essentially foreign territories in India. Areas not governed by the same economic laws as the rest of the country. The potential for mismanagement, instability and violence is enormous and India's history of dealing with land acquisition and displaced communities does not offer one much hope that this time things will be done for the benefit of the affected communities.

While the government claims that SEZ will create employment in the country and purports to have resettlement and rehabilitations schemes in place, it is hard to believe promises made by the same government whose "development" projects have displaced millions of people who, decades after being displaced, are still waiting for compensation. Those who stand to lose the most come from adivasi and tribal communities that already suffer because of existing land policies that completely disregard their constitutional rights. Ekta Parishad activists are working throughout the country to create awareness, to organize campaigns and to lobby for the abolishment of SEZs in India. In the mean time, the National Land Reforms Committee, headed by the Minister for Rural Development, is working to push the government to amend SEZ policies to ensure that the rights of the affected communities are at the forefront of policy design and to bring an end to the use of agricultural lands for non-agricultural purposes.

ACTIVIST TRAINING IN DELHI

This March 12th, Ekta Parishad field activists from Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand came to Delhi to participate in a land workshop and to discuss their role in the field since the formation of the National Land Reforms Committee. In order to properly analyze land grievances and develop frameworks for national land reform policies, the Committee needs detailed case studies and land status information from the villages where the activists are present. Participants received training on approaches to information gathering and data verification. The land grievances collected by Ekta Parishad are area and subject specific and activists will compile detailed studies of the region specific information so that the Committee can work towards the development of policies that are appropriate for each State. Ekta Parishad and members of the Committee will conduct similar training workshops in Maharashtra (April 2-3,) Tamil Nadu (April 8-9,) Rajasthan (April 14-15,) and Assam (April 29-30.)

PV RAJAGOPAL DISCUSSES NON-VIOLENT ACTION IN CANADA AND EUROPE

Ekta Parishad president PV Rajagopal is currently traveling through Canada speaking with organizations and individuals about non-violent action as a way of creating social justice. Meetings with members of the Assembly of First Nations, whose West Coast Regional Chief Shawn Atleo participated in Janadesh, are being planned. Rajagopal Ji has spoken with interfaith groups and students about Janadesh and is planning a visit to Europe next month. Members of Ekta Europe are organizing meetings in France, Great Britain, Ireland, Germany and Switzerland where Rajagopal Ji will speak to numerous organizations supporting the vision of Ekta Parishad. He will also be meeting with Via Campesina's Jose Bove to discuss the impact of genetically modified organisms on agriculture dependent communities.

First Meeting of the National Land Reforms Committee

When the Minister for Rural Development opened last month's meeting, he made it clear that the suggestions of the National Land Reforms Committee (NLRC) would be integral to the development of more equitable land reform policies in India. Committee members met to discuss the expansion of the Committee's Terms of Reference (ToR.) Some of the additions to the ToR will be;

1. Issues related to the North-East be treated as a separate item;
2. The roles of Panchayati Raj institutions and the PESA be given special consideration;
3. Land alienation due to market forces be explored in more depth;
4. Thorough examination of measures to provide women with greater access to land;
5. Land alienation of lands belonging to both Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to be studied further.

In addition to these changes, Committee members were divided into sub-groups, each group being allotted specific responsibilities such as reviewing the Land Ceiling Program, developing strategies for the distribution of government, Bhoodan and Gramdan lands, and exploring the policy changes necessary for the effective implementation of land reform programs. Two new members have been introduced to the Committee; Shri B. N. Yugandhar from the Planning Commission of India and Ramesh Sharma of Ekta Parishad.

Committee members are planning to visit several Special Economic Zone (SEZ) sites in order to speak to affected communities about the consequences of agricultural lands that are sold for non-agricultural purposes and to begin designing the amendments necessary for the SEZ policies that displace millions of India's citizens.

Dispute Over Status of Forestland in MP, Chhattisgarh

Down to Earth, March 24th, 2008

The Supreme Court on August 24, 2007, ordered Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh governments to respond to a petition to clarify the status of at least 1.2 million hectares (ha). Called “Orange area” because it was marked in that color on the map, both the revenue and forest departments of the states claim it. The confusion was never cleared through land survey and settlement, leaving several grey—or in this case orange—areas. This directly affects over one million adivasi families that are labeled ‘encroachers’. Since the 70s, both departments have been issuing different directions for the 1.2 million ha.

For the Down to Earth article visit

http://www.downtoearth.org.in/full6.asp?foldername=20071015&filename=news&sec_id=4&sid=24

Peace and Harmony Yatra in Orissa

Orissa’s mineral wealth and large coast line has made the state a favorite among foreign investors for mining and refining aluminum and steel as well as investing in infrastructure, power plants and petro-chemical production. Orissa holds 1/5 of India’s coal, 1/4 of its iron ore and 1/3 of its bauxite. Companies like Arcelor Mittal and POSCO both have steel plants in the state. The high level of foreign investment in Orissa may mean big bucks for the government, but for the thousands of displaced or otherwise affected tribal communities, foreign interests have meant environmental destruction and the loss of agricultural lands for non-agricultural purposes. India’s Central government has designated huge swaths of land as SEZs which led to mass protests and resulted in unprecedented violence by authorities against those involved in the fight against foreign investment projects that steal their lands, poison their waters and destroy their livelihoods.

This March 28th, Ekta Parishad’s Orissa team is organizing a “Peace and Harmony Yatra” from Barabati Port, Cuttack to the Santi Stupa, Dhauli Mountain in Bhubaneswar on March 31st. The march will not only draw public attention to the realities of displacement in the region and the struggles of the people, but will encourage people to use the principles of non-violence when dealing with unjust policies that favor foreign investors and leave thousands of the state’s citizens without usable lands. In light of the violence that threatens lives in Orissa, the activists of Ekta Parishad believe that this peaceful demonstration will bring the demands of the people to the government. Agricultural lands can not continue to be sold to the highest bidder at the cost of the rights of Orissa’s citizens.



LAND REFORM IN SOUTH ASIA: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS FOR THE CREATION OF GENUINE REFORM

On March 15th organizations from all over South Asia met to discuss their role in the creation of more equitable land reform policies in the region. South Asia has the largest number of poor people in the world, with the majority living in rural areas without access to livelihood resources. With the commercialization of agriculture and an increasingly globalized economy, many farming communities have been displaced and left without a means of livelihood. In India alone, there have been 125,000 farmer suicides in the last 10 years. With the introduction of Special Economic Zones, large tracts of agricultural land are being used for non-agricultural purposes without developing alternative sources of livelihood for those affected. The corporate sector is able to use the current economic policies of South Asia as a means of gaining large pieces of land without being held accountable for the lives of the rural communities being affected. There is an urgent need for people to come together and unite the fragmented struggle for land reform in South Asia. The Bangalore meeting provided concerned individuals and organizations a venue to come together and begin planning for actions that can create the land reform policies necessary to ensure that the poorest people of the South Asian community have the support they need to ensure that their livelihood needs are met.

Ekta Parishad activists Ramesh Sharma and Pradeep Priyadarshi attended along with representatives from international organization such as IBON International (Philippines,) the Thai Labor Union, the Kenya Land Alliance, ANPA and CSRC (Nepal,) MONLAR (Sri Lanka) and 15

Indian organizations. The meeting allowed organizations to share their ideas and campaign strategies. As a result of the discussions held, 2 levels of shared action will be taken. On May 1st, Indian organizations will send a letter to the Prime Minister urging him to seriously considered issues relating to farmer's suicides and take actions to deal with the reasons for the high rate of suicides. A march from Nandigram, West Bengal to Chengara in the Pathanamthitta district of Kerala, will be organized to bring attention to the rampant land grabbing taking place and the high number of SEZs in India. Organization will send members to participate in the march when possible and will show their solidarity by writing letters to State and Central Governments urging them to amend Special Economic Zone policies and bring an end to the use of agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes.

Nepalese people's movement for land rights, ANPA, also plans to organize a people's caravan this summer that will draw attention to the need for land reform to be taken seriously by the new government that will be formed after this April's elections. Important to the election agenda this year will be land reform and the people's caravan will help ensure that the government feels constant pressure to make land reform and food sovereignty an essential part of its actions. Also in Nepal, the Asia Social Forum will be holding workshops that will give participants the opportunity to present their thoughts on the formation of a joint Land Council. Participants will share information and case studies and discuss methods of bringing the common interests of all participants together for the creation of a more inclusive and fully representative agenda.

EKTA PARISHAD MAHILA MANCH MEETING

On February 27th, female leaders from Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Jharkhand, Bihar, Tamil Nadu and Kerala met in Katni, Madhya Pradesh to discuss the future campaigning strategies for Ekta Mahila Manch. Discussions centered on the design of a women's policy and activists are currently in the process of determining what shape the policy will take. Ekta Mahila Manch works to ensure that women are equally represented in the campaign for their land and livelihood rights. Awareness building and advocacy training are part of Mahila Manch's approach to the economic empowerment and social freedom of women in India.

Uniting to Understand Forest Rights

This month Ekta Parishad activists and local communities came together to help create awareness in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh about the forest rights of tribal and dalit communities. From February 18th to March 8th, activists traveled over 4000kms from Surguja to Raipur in Chhattisgarh, visiting more than 5000 villages and from February 13th to March 4th visiting more than 7000 villages in several different areas of Madhya Pradesh. The recently amended Forest Act has the potential to impact thousands of the regions citizens and it is imperative that people understand the Act in relation to their own rights. Village level committees will be set up to verify land usage and occupancy so that State and local administration can use the reports to properly allocate land pattas. Before the Act's amendment, only those who had occupied lands before 1980 were eligible to receive pattas for their lands. The changes in the Act allow those occupying lands before December 2005 to apply for land pattas. Activist facilitated the establishment of the committees and worked with communities, including many Janadesh participants, to ensure that those eligible for pattas understand the process of gaining the official rights to the lands they occupy. Officials in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Jharkhand have agreed to withdraw forest offences filed against tribal communities for encroachment and Wildlife Protection Act violations. Activists will continue to work with communities and government officials to ensure that all of those eligible for land pattas are granted the rights to their lands.

Shipyard Workers Begin Satyagraha to Washington

By Sunita Sohrabji
India-West Staff Reporter



More than 100 guest-worker welders and pipe-fitters from India began an eight-day satyagraha (nonviolent resistance) March 18th from New Orleans to Washington, DC, to protest the Indian government's failure to protect them from alleged slave-like conditions at worksites in Texas and Mississippi.

The workers, all former employees of Signal International, began their 1,000-mile march from the Department of Labor building in New Orleans. They will arrive in Washington on Mar. 26 to demand a meeting with Indian Ambassador Ronen Sen.

Saket Soni, director of the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice, told India-West, "The Indian government celebrates NRIs and is able to build airports from their remittances but turns its back on them when they expose the ugly reality of immigrant life in the U.S."

To see Sunita Sohrabji's article, visit

http://www.indiawest.com/view.php?subaction=showfull&id=1206035114&archive=&start_from=&uc