
Bangladesh: Resistance against coal open-pit mine in Phulbari

In August 2006, Phulbari, a town located in the Dinajpur district, witnessed the killing of five persons at the hands of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) during a massive rally against the controversial open pit coal-digging project supervised by UK-based Asia Energy. More hundreds were injured among a crowd of some 50,000 people opposing a coal open-pit mine which would cover an area with more than a hundred villages of seven unions in four Upazilas —Phulbari, Birampur, Nawabganj and Parbatipur— and part of Phulbari Sadar Upazila, under Dinajpur district.

The mine would not only affect at least 17,000 hectares across four sub-districts displacing at least 50,000 people but also create a thousand-foot deep hollow in order to reach the layer of the coal (that after 30 years of digging will contain toxic substances), dewater the mine during the entire lifetime of the project so that the hollow of the mine does not get immersed in water, cause noise pollution by regular dynamite explosion and permanent trucks and trains traffic, air pollution by coal dust, water pollution from washing of the coal, and threaten the Sundarbans.

Phillip Gain explains (1) that the coal will be carried to the deep seaport through the Sundarbans (the largest mangrove forest on earth) for which a new seaport and railroads need to be built. The noise and water pollution already created by the Mongla Port that harms the animals, plants and other life forms in the mangrove forest will be increased by the added transportation over the 30 years of the mine's lifetime.

The 2006 massive protests that went on several days brought the small town to a halt blocking a major highway that passes through it. Eventually, the government made an agreement with the people pledging to withdraw Asia Energy, and prohibit open pit mining in Bangladesh.

A draft coal policy is being considered now by the government which though prohibits exports, is being challenged by the people, who accuse the interim government of betraying the spirit of their movement as long as it does however allow open-pit mining as a pilot project, which according to insiders could well be the Phulbari coal mine.

A documentary film on the Phulbari resistance titled “The Blood Soaked Banner of Phulbari” can be seen online at <http://banglapraxis.wordpress.com/2008/01/09/documentary-film-the-blood-soaked-banner-of-phulbari/>

Article based on:

“Residents of Phulbari apprehensive of coal policy”, The New Age, January 2008, <http://banglapraxis.wordpress.com/2008/01/09/residents-of-phulbari-apprehensive-of-coal-policy/>;

(1)“Killings in Phulbari Ignite Unstoppable Protest: Local Communities Stand Strong against Open Cut Mining”, Philip Gain, SEHD, <http://www.sehd.org/phulbari/enreport2.html>

