
Bangladesh: Local people react at possible seismic survey in the Sundarbans

The Bangladeshi organisation BanglaPraxis, together with other local groups, have reacted against a reported move from Shell Bangladesh to conduct an aerial and seismic survey in the Sundarbans mangrove forest from September 27.

Bangladesh is primarily agricultural, although urbanisation is proceeding rapidly, and it has moved increasingly towards a market-oriented economy since the mid-1970s, making industrial development a priority and following a path towards privatisation, free market reforms and incentive to foreign investment, most of which goes to the natural gas, electricity, and physical infrastructure areas.

Until the beginning of the 1990s, state oil and gas company Petrobangla, along with its eight operating companies (OCs), was the sole player in the Bangladeshi oil and gas sectors. Over the past few years, however, Bangladesh has encouraged foreign oil companies to do business in the country. At present, Shell, Texaco, Scotland's Cairn Energy PLC; Holland Sea Search, Unocal, Rexwood-Oakland, and UMC Bangladesh Corporation are active in exploration under six Production Sharing Contracts (PSCs) partnerships with Petrobangla.

One of the most affected areas by the "development" push is the Sundarbans mangrove swamp forest, in the country's southwestern coastline, considered a world heritage and the world largest mangrove forest. More than four million people who live around the Sundarbans derive part of their subsistence extracting resources of this forest --wood products, non-wood products, fisheries and other services like tourism. And millions of others are indirectly dependent on the Sundarbans.

Recently, SBCP Watch Group, a network of organisations monitoring Asian Development Bank funded projects in the Sundarbans, organized a programme on conservation of the Sundarbans. When the co-ordinator of the Watch group raised the issue of the Shell survey in the forest, the multinational company responded by sending a media briefing pack to every participant of the programme. There, Shell Bangladesh authorities explained that they would not explore the Sundarbans forest itself but that they will conduct an aeromagnetic survey in block 10, which is just beside the Sundarbans, and has a patch of forest in it. The blocks are land divisions leased out by the government for oil/gas exploration and extractive activities by multinational companies.

The company also claims that the survey will be conducted 10 kilometres away from the forest. However, environmentalists consider 20 kilometres as the impact zone of the forest. 'Tremors' to be generated for the seismic survey would have far reaching consequences for the Sundarbans, destroying the fragile ecosystem. Any drilling in the upstream of the forest is bound to carry polluted waters downstream in the Sundarbans. Drilling in block 10, next to the forest, carries the same risk, because many rivers flow into the forest from the areas of block 10.

Local organisations feel that if it were true that Shell does not plan to drill in the forest then there is no need to conduct any survey. However, they have evidence that the multinational company is going ahead with the exploration and that it has been conducting some biased people's consultation in the

region through BETS, a local firm recruited by Shell.

The huge peoples' movement in Bangladesh against export of gas has built up awareness. Local people are now fighting back and the local organisation AOSED --a member of the network Coastal Development Partnership (CDP), which has been working on the Shell issue-- is launching a campaign against Shell's move. They demand that Shell should not start any initiative within or around the forest, in block 5 or in the nearby block 10, without consulting people's groups concerned. The multinational should consult not only the organizations who are working with them but also other organizations who are critical of Shell.

Concerned people feel that they don't need any "scientific" information since it is their home where the survey or drilling may be done, and they know too well that the impact on them and their livelihood will mean depredation, destruction, and displacement.

Article based on information from: "Grave concern over move to explore gas in Sundarbans", M Shafiqul Alam, The Financial Express, <http://www.financialexpress-bd.com/index.asp?aday=9&amonth=6&aYear=03&Submit=+++Submit+++> ; State Of Sundarbans, Anisur Rahman, Bangladesh Door, <http://www.bangladesh-door.com/> ; "Sundarban Threatened Anew By Shell Oli", Late Friday News, 117th, Urgent Notice Addendum, sent by Alfredo Quarto, Mangrove Action Project, e-mail: mangroveap@olympus.net , http://www.earthisland.org/map/ltfrn_117.htm ; direct information from Zakir Kibria, BanglaPraxis, e-mail: banglapraxis@yahoo.com , and Alfredo Quarto, e-mail: Late Friday News, 117th Urgent Notice Addendum