
Pakistan: local people's long struggle for the forests

The oil industry has been denounced for its environmentally destructive practices in Pakistani rainforests (see WRM Bulletin 9). Nevertheless, this is not the only threat hovering over them. For the last two years, forest dwellers of the District of Dir have courageously waged a war against illegal timber smuggling, the centralized and bureaucratic system of forest management, and appropriation of forest royalty belonging to thousands of poor and marginalized indigenous peoples by local elites, royalty purchasers and district administration. The current protest movement started in 1997 after the local administration, in partnership with influential politicians and timber contractors deprived them of their share in the royalty.

Since the authorities turned a deaf ear to the peoples' demands, in 1997 hundreds of forest dwellers organized a protest march to the provincial capital, Peshawar. As they reached Peshawar, they were arrested and beaten-up by the police. Realizing the gravity of the situation, the Chief Minister of the Province called for a meeting with the local representative council of elders-jirga. An Enquiry Committee comprising the members of district judiciary and the forest department was formed. Two-and-a-half months after it concluded with an endorsement of the position of forest dwellers, declaring illegal the distribution of Rs.200 million among royalty purchasers. Most of the defaulters identified by the Enquiry Committee belong to the mainstream political parties and are members of provincial and national assemblies. The recommendations of the Enquiry Committee include recovery of defaulted money, distribution of remaining royalty through the district administration, enlisting the exact royalty holders, arranging land settlement in the area and initiating disciplinary action against the then Assistant Commissioner of District Dir.

However, the report of the Enquiry Committee was not made public. Then the forest dwellers had to organise another protest campaign and set up a sit-in camp in the provincial capital, Peshawar. The local administration was obliged to implement almost all of the recommendations of the Enquiry Committee. Due to political pressure and vested interests, the district administration successfully managed to prolong the implementation of this directive. As a result, a third phase of the protest movement started in February 1999. For five months, forest dwellers camped at the district headquarters and some of them went on hunger strike.

Forest dwellers contacted the Awami Forestry Ittehad (Peoples Forestry Coalition), a membership-based coalition of local action groups, forestry networks and advocacy NGOs, and asked them to help them in this struggle for livelihood and conservation of indigenous forestry resources. As a result, a Dir-Kohistan Watch Cell was established to generate public support and lobby the government.

On June 4th the police arrested hundreds of forest dwellers and members of local NGOs while they were staging a peaceful sit-in and hunger strike against illegal distribution of forest royalties. After the arrests, forest dwellers organized a long march towards the capital, Islamabad. Two thousand forest people including children, elders and disabled persons took part in this arduous long march. On the third day, the government asked the demonstrators to suspend the march and promised them to solve the matter in a week time. Forest dwellers accepted the government's appeal but the authorities

did not hold to their promise. The situation is now uncertain since forest dwellers have issued a deadline of June 25 to the government.

Pakistani demonstrators are asking concerned people worldwide to support their fair struggle for their livelihood and environment. Please write to the following authorities, demanding them: the release of the arrested forest people of Dir-Kohistan, the set up of an independent enquiry committee to investigate brutalities of the district police and local administration of district Dir, and the implementation of the recommendations of the Enquiry Committee.

PLEASE WRITE LETTERS OR SEND EMAILS TO:

The Prime Minister of Pakistan
Prime Minister Secretariat
Islamabad, Pakistan

The Minister of Interior, Government of Pakistan
Pak Secretariat, Islamabad, Pakistan.

The Minister of Information, Government of Pakistan
Pak Secretariat
Islamabad, Pakistan.

The Chief Minister of NWFP,

The Inspector General of Police, NWFP

The Pakistan Mission to the United Nations (New York)

Pakistani embassy or consulate in your country.

Please send copies of your correspondence to SUNGI Development Foundation

(Please do not write SUNGI's name in your letter to the Pakistan authorities.) Source: SUNGI, 24/6/99.