

KOODANKULAM: CRACKDOWN ON ANTI-NUCLEAR ACTIVISTS & NGO'S

On February 29, within days of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh blaming foreign-funded NGOs for instigating anti-nuclear protests against the nuclear reactors in Koodankulam, the government booked four NGOs for alleged violation of the Foreign Contributions Regulations Act (FCRA) and froze their bank accounts. Early March, 77 NGO's were put on a 'watch list'. The State deported a 49-year old German national for 'reportedly helping the protestors' and cancelled visa from Fukushima residents.

WISE Amsterdam – The movement against at Koodankulam began in the late 1980's after the first rumors about possible construction of nuclear reactor in the most southern part of India. Later the opposition united under the banner of People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy (PMANE), an umbrella organization in which various organizations of the people have joined together to fight the nuclear plant, and have organized dozens of demonstrations, meetings in practically every village in the area, cycle yatras, seminars against the project.

After having sought action against 12 NGOs in Tamil Nadu - apart from the four facing cases for alleged diversion of funds - another escalation of the Indian government's actions took place. On March 2, the Indian government has put 77 foreign NGOs on its global watch list, making it difficult for their officials to get visas to India. The home ministry put together the list based on information from intelligence agencies and the suspicious conduct of representatives of these NGOs in the past. Top government sources said the watch list had been circulated to all Indian missions and posts with an advice to "monitor" visa requests from the NGOs - a euphemism for putting the applications through greater scrutiny that would lead to delays or rejection. Officials refused to name the NGOs, insisting this would have serious diplomatic repercussions. But it was confirmed that most were from the US and European Union.

Rather than respond to substantive issues of science and safety, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA, the ruling coalition) deployed its spin doctors to change the frame. It begins with the PM announcing to the media that India's nuclear program is being derailed by NGOs funded by the Americans. Next, an innocent and unsuspecting German tourist, Rainer Hermann Sonntag, is picked up from his budget hotel at midnight, and deported on suspicion that he was illegally diverting funds to the Koodankulam campaign. "If the behavior of our politicians was shameful, the total capitulation of our media to the police version was downright frightening", according to the independent journalist Nityanand Jayaraman. "If Hermann was guilty of illegally diverting funds to any campaign, why was the government in a hurry to deport him? The press-articles are based on anonymous sources, and unproven allegations and replete with defamatory statements." In March an already issued visa for a Japanese women from Fukushima, invited by Greenpeace for a speakers tour, was cancelled.

Meanwhile, the home ministry has blacklisted four NGOs, two of which are church-based non-profits, for violating Foreign Contributions Regulations Act (FCRA) rules. They are Tuticorin Multipurpose Social Service Society (TMSSS), Tuticorin Diocese Association (TDA), People's Education for Action and Community Empowerment and Good Vision Charitable Trust.

TMSSS and TDA received some money from US and Germany as aid. "But we have not funded the Koodankulam protests with this foreign aid. The government has frozen our bank accounts and is trying to terrorize us with motivated campaign against the church," says Father William Santhanam, spokesperson of the Tuticorin diocese.

From 2008-2010, Good Vision, the fourth NGO facing government action, received foreign funds through CARE India, UNDP and Oxfam for implementing post-tsunami relief work. But, according to the organisation's foreign contribution account the last monetary activity was two years ago. The director of Good Vision, Mano Thangaraj, is an active politician and like many people active in the People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy (PMANE). "This is nothing but a way of terrorising leaders of the anti-KKNPP movement," he said.

On March 5, a large group of 'eminent citizens' issued a statement on the harassment of anti-nuclear activists and the government's campaign of vilification of the sustained popular movement against the Koodankulam nuclear plant Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has trivialized the movement, and the five months-long relay fast by thousands of people, by attributing it to 'the foreign hand', or Western non-governmental organizations, without citing even remotely credible evidence. "This is part of a growing, dangerous, tendency to de-legitimize dissent. If we reduce genuine differences and disagreements with official positions to mere plots of 'subversion' by 'the foreign hand', there can be no real engagement with ideas, and no democratic debate through which divergences can be reconciled. Absence of debate on nuclear safety, itself a life-and-death matter, can only impoverish the public discourse and our democracy. The 'foreign hand' charge sounds especially bizarre because the government has staked all on installing foreign-origin reactors and tried to dilute the nuclear liability Act under foreign pressure."

Open letter PMANE

On February 28, the People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy published an open letter, saying that fisherfolks, farmers, shopkeepers, Dalit workers, beedi-rolling women and others near the southernmost tip of India, have been fighting against the Koodankulam nuclear power project since the late 1980s.

This Russian project was shelved right after the Soviet Union's collapse and taken up again in 1997. The Indian government and Russians have constructed two huge reactors of 1000 MW each without any consent of or consultation with the local people. We have just obtained the outdated Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report after 23 years of long and hard struggle. The Indian nuclear authorities have not shared any basic information about the project with the public. They do not give complete and truthful answers for our questions on the 'daily routine emissions' from these reactors, the amount and management of nuclear waste, fresh water needs, impact of the coolant water on our sea and seafood, decommissioning costs and effects, Russian liability and so forth. We are deeply disturbed by all this.

Our people watched the Fukushima accident of March 11, 2011 on TV at their homes and understood the magnitude and repercussions of a nuclear accident. Right after that on July 1, 2011, the KKNPP announced the 'hot run' of the first reactor that made so much noise and smoke. Furthermore, the authorities asked the people, in a mock drill notice, to cover their nose and mouth and run for their life in case of an emergency. As a result of all these, our people in Koodankulam and Idinthakarai villages made up their minds and took to the streets on their own on August 11, 2011. Then we all together decided to host a day-long hunger strike on August 16 at Idinthakarai and a three-day fast on August 17-19 at Koodankulam. On the 17th itself authorities invited us for talks and asked us to postpone our struggle to the first week of September because of the upcoming Hindu and Muslim festivals. In a few days' time, the chief of the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) announced that the first reactor would go critical in September 2011.

So we embarked upon an indefinite hunger strike on September 11, 2011 and our women blocked a state road on September 13 for a few hours when the state and central governments continued to ignore us. The state Chief Minister invited us for talks on September 21 and passed a cabinet resolution the next day asking the central government to halt all the work until the fears and concerns of the local people were allayed. We ended our hunger strike on the 22nd but went on another round of indefinite hunger strike from October 9 to 16 when the talks with the Indian Prime

Minister failed. We laid siege in front of the KKNPP on October 13-16, 2011 when the KKNPP authorities did not halt work at the site as per the Tamil Nadu state cabinet resolution. We ended both the indefinite hunger strike and the siege on October 16 in order for our people to participate in the local body elections on the 17th. From October 18, 2011, we have been on a relay hunger strike continuously. We have been carrying out massive rallies, village campaigns, public meetings, seminars, conferences, and other demonstrations such as shaving our heads, cooking on the street, burning the models of the nuclear plants etc. The morale of the people is still very very high.

There is no foreign country or agency or money involved in this classic people's struggle to defend our right to life and livelihood. Our fishermen, farmers, workers and women make small voluntary donations in cash and kind to sustain our simple Gandhian struggle. Our needs are very few and expenses much less. We only provide safe drinking water to the hunger strikers and visitors. People from all over Tamil Nadu (and sometimes from other parts of India) come on their own arranging their own transportation. For our own occasional travel, we hire local taxis.

Instead of understanding the people's genuine feelings and fulfilling our demands, the government has foisted serious cases of 'sedition' and 'waging war on the Indian state' on the leaders of our movement. There are as many as 180-200 cases on us. There have been police harassment, intelligence officers' stalking, concocted news reports in the pro-government media, abuse of our family members, hate mail, death threats and even physical attack.

Although India is a democracy, our Delhi government has been keen on safeguarding the interests of the multinational corporations and pleasing some powerful countries such as the United States, Russia, France etc. The welfare of the 'ordinary citizens' of India does not figure on their list of priorities. The central government and the ruling Congress party stand by the secretive nuclear agreements they have made with all different countries and consider us as stumbling blocks on their road to development. The main opposition party, Bharatiya Janata Party (Hindu nationalist party) is interested in the nuclear weapons program and making India a superpower and hence loves everything nuclear. It is ironic that these two corrupt and communal forces join hands with each other against their own people. They bend backwards to please their American and other bosses but question our integrity and nationalist credentials.

Our leaders and the group of 15 women were physically attacked on January 31, 2012 at Tirunelveli by the Congress thugs and Hindutva Fascists when we had gone for talks with the central government expert team. Now the government cuts electricity supply so often and so indiscriminately in order to drive home the message that nuclear power plant is needed for additional power. They try to create resentment and opposition among the public against our anti-nuclear struggle.

To put it all in a nutshell, this is a classic David-Goliath fight between the 'ordinary citizens' of India and the powerful Indian government supported by the rich Indian capitalists, MNCs, imperial powers and the global nuclear mafia. They promise FDI, nuclear power, development, atom bombs, security and superpower status. We demand risk-free electricity, disease-free life, unpolluted natural resources, sustainable development and harmless future. They say the Russian nuclear power plants are safe and can withstand earthquakes and tsunamis. But we worry about their side-effects and after-effects. They speak for their scientist friends and business partners and have their eyes on commissions and kickbacks. But we fight for our children and grandchildren, our progeny, our animals and birds, our land, water, sea, air and the skies.

Sources: Open Letter PMANE, 28 February 2012 / Nityanand Jayaraman at Tehelka.com, 29 February 2012 / Hindustan Times, 2 March 2012 / Indian Express, 29 February & 2 March 2012 / "The Anti-Koodankulam Struggle and the Money Issue", by S. P. Udayakumar, Ph.D. Coordinator, Struggle Committee People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy (PMANE). March 7, 2012

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