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Public Statement

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India: Deaths in West Bengal due to police firing during protests against new industrial project

Amnesty International is deeply concerned at reports of the use of excessive and unnecessary force by police in West Bengal (Eastern India) against farmers protesting proposed displacement by the state government for a new industrial project, which has resulted in deaths of at least 14 persons and injuries.

Several reports say that, on 14 March, at least ten people were reportedly shot dead by police and at least 150 persons were injured in the shooting and other incidents of violence. This was after more than 4,000 officers of the West Bengal state police, aided by supporters of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) which leads the ruling Left Front in the state, cordoned off Bhangabehara and six other nearby areas of protest at Nandigram in Eastern Midnapore district, and sought to clear the area of protestors and barricades put up by them to prevent the entry of government officials.

The reports said the police, facing groups of demonstrators armed with sticks and pelting stones, reportedly fired rubber bullets and teargas canisters to clear them, but later also fired live rounds at the protestors. According to several reports, the police continued to shoot at protestors even as they were fleeing.

Some reports say that 23 bodies of villagers were brought to various hospitals. Human rights activists have reported that local residents have brought 47 persons with bullet injuries including women and children to hospitals in Nandigram, Tamluk and Kolkata for treatment. The police, while admitting that several protestors were killed in the firing, have, however, claimed that four of the protestors died in clashes and when a home-made bomb they were preparing exploded. The police have also stated that among the injured were 42 policemen.

Apart from the police firing, reports speak of several persons injured in clashes between protesting farmers led by *Krishjami Raksha Samiti* (Save Farmland Committee) and the police who were being aided by supporters of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) which leads West Bengal's Left Front government.

Human rights activists have reported that both the CPI (M) supporters and police continue to conduct raids on homes and have detained an unspecified number of persons. Reports also say that the CPI (M) supporters prevented media persons and opposition leaders from reaching the area on March 14 and illegally detained two media persons covering the violent events on that day.

In this context, Amnesty International urges the Government of West Bengal to:

order a prompt, impartial and independent inquiry into the Nandigram police shootings and violence

and make the findings public;
ensure that all state officials, including police personnel, who are suspected of perpetrating human rights violations are prosecuted;
release those detained without any criminal charges at Nandigram and
ensure that, while law and order should be maintained, those who are engaged in peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of assembly and speech are able to do so without fear of violence, harassment or false accusation of involvement in criminal activities.

Moreover, Amnesty International believes that full consultations about the human rights impact of economic decisions with those to be affected are vital means through which human rights are safeguarded in the context of development. In this respect, the organisation reiterates its January 11 demands that the Government of West Bengal should:

announce and implement a consistent policy of full consultation with local populations before any development which could affect their livelihood can take place and
ensure that, where it is proposed to resettle populations, there is just, adequate and culturally-sensitive rehabilitation, resettlement and reparation for those affected.

Background

Since December 2006 Nandigram has witnessed frequent violence after farmers started protests against possible displacement following a notification issued by authorities at the neighbouring Haldia port identifying their lands as sites to be acquired for a new chemical production project.

The project reportedly requires at least 4,000 hectares of land for setting up a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) which would be jointly developed as a chemical hub by the state-owned Industrial Development Corporation and the Indonesia-based Salem group of companies. Another SEZ promoted by the same group is also reportedly planned in the Haldia area.

In January this year, six persons were killed in violent clashes involving members of the Save Farmland Committee and persons linked to the CPI (M) which is seeking to accelerate industrial development in West Bengal. Following this, the state government announced the withdrawal of the notification and stated that it would "exercise caution" while going ahead with this project. Nevertheless, in February, Nandigram witnessed frequent violent protests. A state intelligence official was killed and a woman CPI (M) supporter was allegedly subjected to sexual assault and murdered by a section of the protestors. These events have yet to be fully investigated.

The protests at Nandigram followed unrest in Singur (West Bengal), when opposition parties and a number of farmers threatened with displacement by a state government move to acquire farm land for a Tata Motors' automobile manufacturing project staged demonstrations. The West Bengal state government plans to set up at least six other major industrial projects, including SEZs, in the state, necessitating the acquiring of at least 10,000 hectares of land.

In a bid to boost national economic growth, India has been promoting SEZs across the country. The policy of acquiring land for such industrial projects has sparked protests from local communities fearing land displacement and threats to their livelihood.

