

FIAN WEST BENGAL E-NEWS LETTER



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**Happy
New Year**

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Land Eviction in Singur, the Struggle Continues

The industrialization drive of the West Bengal government and the terms and conditions by which the Tatas are set for acquiring lands at Singur raises one key issue of contemporary development planning as to 'development for whom'?

Soon after retaining his office for a consecutive second term, (this is 5th term of left rule) the Chief Minister elect Buddhadeb Bhattacharya along with Mr. Ratan Tata at a Press Conference on May 16, 2006 announced that the government would be offering lands to the Tatas in West Midnapur for setting up a car manufacturing plant. In a later stage the announcement was made for the shift in location of the car manufacturing plant to Singur in Hooghly district. This news turned out to be nightmarish.

Popularly called, as the granary of West Bengal, these lands in Singur are highly fertile most of the plots being multi-cropping, besides being home to 30,000 people apart from other labourers related to the production process.

The hard decision of the Left Front government and Tata Motors dichotomized the concerned people as what to be the model of industrialization. People of Singur could not take it as lying down. Krishi Jami Bachao committee was formed when people of Singur decided to wage struggle against the move of the government. The conscientious world community simultaneously launched protest against this mindless industrialization policy of the left front government and urged to withdraw the acquisition decision.

Cutting across the ideological line, intellectuals of the state joined forces with struggling masses of Singur while the left front government refused to pay heed to any reason and did not budge an inch from its earlier decision.

The government unleashed a series of policing, terrorizing, raiding, ransacking and assault on the people of Singur for over a period of seven months. Houses have been burnt down, children and women ruthlessly beaten up and the place was turned it into an inferno. The farmers, who have organised themselves in different against the expropriation, face severe repression by the state government. Women are sexually harassed by the police and several activists and journalists were arrested by the police. Till date, people of Singur have been combating this arrogant move of the so-called Marxist government who are in fact toeing the line of mindless globalization.

Singur is not a singular and isolated event in view of the market assisted land policy of the World Bank, IMF and WTO in the third world countries. It comes within the purview of the state government's larger plan of industrialization through conversion of agricultural lands into non-farmlands. The government has already approved six projects under SEZ in West Bengal in an operational area of 300 hectares. There are 24 such projects in the pipeline to be approved affecting an area of 60000 hectares of agricultural land.

Considering the rate of land alienation and the food security situation in West Bengal, IMSE and FIAN West Bengal have come forward to support the affected persons by highlighting the right to food and livelihood obligations of the state. India is a state party to the International Covenant on Economic Social Cultural Rights, and therefore is duty bound under international law to respect and protect the right to food of all its citizens. Moreover, Article 21 of the Indian Constitution describes right to food and livelihoods with dignity as a fundamental right. International Human rights laws and national constitutional provisions clearly state that evictions leading to destruction of livelihoods should be avoided at any cost, citizens should be protected from the clutches of third party invasions (in this case Tata) and endeavor should be ensured. Due to land acquisition in Singur, the right to food of the peasants in that area is severely threatened. This present initiative of the state to evict poor from their livelihoods in Singur is a clear violation of respect bound obligation of the state under RTF. Furthermore, this very step of the state government stands in direct contradiction with the partial land reforms achievements that had been actually initiated three decades back.

FIAN West Bengal has approached the government departments in West Bengal, using Right to Information (RTI) Act for information involving the land acquisition. As part of its protest campaign FIAN International has circulated "Urgent Actions" to all its chapters worldwide to draw international attention and global civil society concern. Rolf Kunnemenn, Human Rights

FARMERS SUICIDE IN INDIA

They are facing a complete deprivation from the right to livelihood. In negligence, despair and unable to find an avenue to eke out a living, indebted farmers have decided to sell their kidneys. "FARMER'S KIDNEY SALE CENTRE", said the banner at Shingnapur village in Nandgaon tehsil of Amravati district in Maharashtra. In the cotton growing Vidarbha region two forty-four farmers have committed suicides since June last year. India at present is going through the worst agrarian crisis. Its roots can be traced to the Green Revolution with farmers committing suicide, rural population migrating to urban areas for employment and a stagnant agricultural growth rate. As a response to this, former Prime Minister, Mr. V.P. Singh said that until a few years ago, suicides by farmers were confined to the cotton growing areas of Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, the tragic phenomenon had further spread to paddy and Soya belts of Punjab and Maharashtra and the ground nut growers of Kerala. He further mentioned that earlier the tribal and other marginalized classes would leave their homes in search of a living but gradually the composition of migration included farmers, landowners, teachers and the youth. The level of intolerance has hit the farmers of almost all agricultural regions of the country. In Chandigarh, there has been a spurt in suicides recently by farmers who had to sell their lands to pay off their debts. Of the total suicides, 40 percent victims were agricultural labourers. Some gave up their lives the day they sold off their last acre as the family adopted labour as a profession. Also, in Maharashtra, four farmers committed suicide unable to shoulder the burden of debt.

On the other side, the Union Agriculture Minister, Mr. Sharad Pawar has promised to prepare a package for preventing farmers' suicides in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala in a period of two months, supplementing and supporting the State Governments' effort regarding the same. The package would look into the multi-faceted problems of the farmers relating to agriculture credit, irrigation, crop insurance, improving agriculture productivity, extension services and health insurance. Agriculture has been an asset of India since its glorious past; the crops have been the wealth, a security for the farmers. India is throbbing with agricultural potential. Of all barriers to a great development for rural lives, none is as great as the myth of helplessness. What we need is the awareness of the urgency of the task, the will and the courage to tackle it and a whole hearted commitment to its successful performance.

Proma Basu Roy
Member
FIAN West Bengal

Director of FIAN International has personally given protest letters (sisi) to the Chief Minister of West Bengal Mr. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya and to the Minister in Charge of the Land and Land Reforms Department Mr. Rensak Mollah, opposing the eviction of peasants in West Bengal. Several articles are published in state / national newspapers on Singur land conflict and peoples resistances.

An International Fact Finding Mission of Peoples Coalition on Food Sovereignty was organised between September 4-6 2006 with representatives from peasant, human rights, environment and dalit organizations from Nepal, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. IMSE and FIAN West Bengal facilitated the mission. The delegates visited Singur and listened to the villagers. They also met local government officials and representatives of political parties. The team concluded that eviction of peasants would be gross violation of ECOSOC and state should refrain from destruction of livelihoods of 30,000 people in Singur. The team further concluded that majority of the peasants were not in favour of car manufacturing unit and most of them registered written protests to the local government offices.

The leader of the opposition party, Ms. Mamata Banerjee went for a 25 days hunger strike to register her protest against eviction of peasants. Several prominent personalities like Medha Patkar, Arundhati Roy, Magasweta Devi and Aruna Roy have raised their voices against the role of the state and have also called for boycotting Tata products. Moreover, the Supreme Court will review the land acquisition process since it is alleged that the state has not followed the proper procedures to acquire land to be given to a private company.

The situation further deteriorated in Singur when tension erupted after the recovery of an 18-year-old girl's charred body from inside the fenced-off area for the proposed Tata Motors small car project in Singur on December 18, 2006. The incident prompted Trinamul Congress to call a 48-hour bandh on 21 and 22 December (which was later withdrawn after the CM agreed to order a CBI enquiry) and chief minister Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee to order a CID & later on a CBI inquiry. According to reports, the deceased, Tapasi Malik, who participated in all protest movements against land acquisition and also participated in a hunger-strike in her locality on 17.12.2006 in protest against land acquisition in Singur, was allegedly raped, strangled to death and finally set ablaze by unidentified miscreants near Bajemelia around 5.30 a.m. on 18.12.2006. Police quickly removed the body to Singur police station amidst resistance from locals. The body was later taken to Serampore Walsh Hospital and afterwards was sent to Calcutta Medical College and Hospital (CMCH) for postmortem. Police are yet to arrest anyone in this connection.

Tapasi Malik played a key role in bringing farmers of Bajemelia together to fight against forcible acquisition of land by the state government. She was an active participant in the movement against land acquisition there. "She attended all the rallies that took place under the banner of the Singur Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee. Mr Shankar Jana, convener of the Singur Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee, said: "Tapasi was beaten up twice by the police: first at Singur block office on 25 September night when farmers lay siege and on 2 December afternoon when police resorted to a lathicharge." "Tapasi had always been in the forefront of the peasants' movement in Singur. She even brought her family members under the fold of Singur Krishi Jomi Raksha Committee (SKJRC).

The victims of violations of right to food in Singur and elsewhere in West Bengal are eagerly waiting for more international support and solidarity

**Eviction Threats continued in West Bengal:
Eight Peasants Were Killed In Nandigram East Midnapore, West
Bengal,
As They Protested Against Land Acquisition Drive Of The State
Government for development of SEZ.**

At least eight farmers from Nandigram area in Hooghly district have died and five more are in a serious condition, due to attacks unleashed by the cadres of the ruling party to crush the people's movements against a proposed Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Nandigram. Guns have been fired and blood has flown. Police remained silent spectators and the villagers alleged that in some cases police connived with the attackers.

The crux of the controversy relates to the acquisition of nearly 20,000 acres (8,000 hectares) of land in one compact block in this district. This raised an outcry from the villagers which accuses the State government of reneging on its pledge to improve the lot of small and marginal farmers and sharecroppers. On July 31, the West Bengal government signed an agreement (for investments of up to 4.2 billion dollars in infrastructure development in the state) with the MNC Salim Group of Indonesia to implement various 'developmental' projects, including the setting up of a mega chemical industrial estate, a chemical special economic zone (SEZ) at Nandigram, spread across approximately 20,000 acres in a 50:50 joint venture. Construction of a four-lane road bridge over the Haldi River, from Haldia to Nandigram, has also been planned. The agreement envisions the setting up of several urban development projects as well.

This project will result into eviction of more than 100,000 people from their homes and hearths in Nandigram. 27 Mouzas of Nandigram Block 1 and 2 mouzas from Khejuri 2 block would be affected as approximately 14000 hectares of lands would be acquired for SEZ. Of these 29 mouzas, 14 *mouzas* are to be completely acquired; the rest partially. These include 142 temples, 45 mosques and 4 high schools. The state further plans to acquire another 5,000 acres in Mahisadal block for two more SEZs. Villagers, who would be evicted, belong to small and marginal farmers, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers. Approximately 80% of the population of Nandigram belongs to Scheduled caste and minority communities, who lack access to adequate productive resources, education, health and other social facilities. Majority of the people in Nandigram would be unable to find alternative livelihood opportunities, if evicted from their villages, as they are only skilled farmers and have never practiced any other occupation. Lands in Nandigram are fertile agricultural lands and partly irrigated. Main crops are paddy, vegetables and a cash crop i.e. Betel leaves (Pan)
Independent researches and analysis indicate that none of the projects for which land will be taken are productive investments and their employment-generating

potential is almost negligible. With loss of land and age-old occupation, thousands of farmers will be reduced to begging in the streets.

On Jan 3, 2007 in what can be called a sequel to the Singur movement, violence erupted on Wednesday over land acquisition in Nandigram, when according to the villagers government officers tried to serve the land acquisition notice. Police fired several rounds (at least 15 rounds) to quell agitated villagers at Nandigram. Villagers said that at least four of their people, including a 12-year-old boy, sustained bullet injuries in the unprovoked firing and they claimed that the police attacked the procession of the villagers protesting against the notification of land acquisition peacefully. However, the police said it was mob attack on the cops, angry over the publication of gazette on notification for the acquisition.

Afterwards villagers blocked roads with boulders and destroyed a bridge in order to prevent police and local officers to enter the villages. The agitation of the villagers was led by an organisation called Gana Unnayan O Jana Adhikar Raksha Samity (Committee for Mass Development and Protection of People's Rights), which is a constituent of the Singur Krishijami Raksha Committee (Save Singur Farmland Committee).

Reports pouring in from the East Midnapore district said that the violence escalated over the acquisition of land at Nandigram again on January 06, 2007. Earlier handful of CPM supporters who were in favour of land grabbing had to flee from their homes as the villagers was looking for retaliation. Nandigram is separated from the rest of Midnapore and Bengal by a canal. There is a single bridge across the canal. The ruling party cadres gathered in camps on the other side of the canal. That side received many reinforcements and hired goons and criminals started taking positions in these camps on 6th afternoon to threaten villagers. On January 04, 2007 Shri Binoy Konar, a senior party leader of CPM had warned the villagers that no opposition would be brooked to the party's plans of land acquisition. "We will make life hell for them (meaning the farmers)," he said in an interview given to Kolkata TV .

On the night of January 6th, the two villages on the east side of the canal, Sonachura and Tekhali, were attacked by CPI(M) supporters from the west side with bombs and guns. The villagers had anticipated such an attack. The Kolkata TV reporter said unequivocally that the villagers only had farming implements and kitchen knives (yes, women were also among the defenders) to defend themselves. At the time of the attack, the bridge between Khejuri and Sonachuri was guarded by police and they made ways for the miscreants led by the ruling party to organize the mass killing, as stated by several eye witnesses. Almost all the dead are believed to be farmers from Sonachura, including a 14-year-old boy. Eight people have died in the clashes in Nandigram so far and the attacks on peasants are still continuing. On Januray 06, Police were informed by local

people and asked to intervene in order to restore law and order in the area. But all along Police refused to take any steps and allowed the goons to carry out this massacre.

Till date the state government has failed to arrest the culprits in Nandigram and the Chief Minister has declared the peoples resistance in Nandigram as 'Communal' .

In the name of industrialisation the state government of West Bengal is breaching its respect and protect bound obligations under RTF , thereby violating RTF in large-scale. No compensation and rehabilitation package have been announced for the 100,000 people of Nandigram who would soon be victims of eviction. There is also no comprehensive land-use policy developed by the state for acquiring lands to develop Special Economic Zones (SEZ). Singur and Nandigram are burning examples of mindless industrial policies of the state which completely ignores human rights principles. This is however, just the beginning of land grabbing process in the state. The government has proposed to acquire 60,000 hectares of land in the state for industrialisation and development of SEZ . Therefore incidents like Singur and Nandigram would repeat themselves in new pockets of the state and the need of the hour is to voice our protests against these large-scale violations of RTF and all other social cultural, civil and political rights of poor in the state.

The Peoples' movements in Nandigram demands: -

1. Immediate judicial investigation of mass carnage at Nandigram
2. Take immediate steps to identify and punish those police officials who were involved in Nadigram massacre
3. Refrain from acquiring agricultural lands for SEZ which would destroy food security of peasants
4. Disclose the total plan of acquiring land for S.E.Z in detail to the public
5. Comply with RTF obligations and take steps to ensure access to lands of the poor farmers in Nandigram
6. Ensure Security and safety of the villagers in affected villages of Nandigram

International Peoples Tribunal on Eviction of Peasants and Violation of Human Rights in Singur, Nandigram and Other Areas in West Bengal, India

FIAN West Bengal is co-hosting an International Peoples Tribunal on Eviction of peasants in Singur, Nandigram and other areas in West Bengal. The other organizers are IMSE, CECODECON, Socio Legal Aid Research & Training Centre, FTN Coalition, Forum of Voluntary Organisations, West Bengal, Indian Federation of Toiling Peasants, East Coast Fish Workers Union, West Bengal Gandhi Peace Foundation, Peoples Action Network for National Integration and Communal Harmony, RTI Network West Bengal Peoples Coalition on Food Sovereignty, Pesticide Action Network (Asia-Pacific), West Bengal (south) Wood Works Workers Union, South Asian Peasants Coalition, Rural Exploitation and Atrocities Prevention Forum, Asian Peasant Coalition, Earth Care, International Planning Committee (South Asia), Save River Save Villages Committee, Ekok Matra, Committee to Assist the Struggle of Singur Peasants against Eviction.

The land grabbing of the West Bengal government in the name of industrialization and Special Economic Zones is becoming violent day by day. The government is trying its best to curb the human rights of its own citizens. The people are protesting, utilizing all peaceful means but the death toll is rising. Casualty in Singur was two. Threats of eviction and violations of human rights in Nandigram have already taken at least six lives.

To pursue democratic ways, the aggrieved peasants and people moved all forums including the High Court and the Apex Court. The petitions of the people are languishing in the courts of law for positive redressal.

The human rights abuses in the country in general and in West Bengal in particular are yet to be addressed properly. Despite the fact that India is a state party to International Covenants on Economic, Social & Cultural Rights and International Covenants on Civil Political Rights, translation of human rights Covenants have not taken its effect in reality in the country. The Directive Principles of State policy, the guiding ethics of legality, has been overlooked by the federal states while imposing their own agenda of industrialization and such development initiatives which exclude poor from the very process. The implementation of progressive people's friendly acts is often constrained by the inaction of the state authorities. Moreover, victims of human rights violations often fail to get justice due to unwillingness of the government to acknowledge a complaint and also due to complex and time consuming judicial procedures.

In such a situation, for the sake of wider justice and realization of rights, we have strongly felt the need to organize an International People's Tribunal to adjudicate the wider issues relating to the eviction of peasants and their livelihood losses in Singur, Nandigram and other areas in West Bengal.

This People's Tribunals would be quasi-legal and could be best described as "Tribunal of Conscience" which would seek to highlight the need for public accountability. Eminent public figures from various backgrounds including retired Supreme Court and High Court judges of India, social activists, human rights activists and other prominent personalities from India and abroad, who are associated with the solidarity movements against eviction of peasants, would be present in this tribunal. State representatives and representatives of corporate houses have also been invited in this event.

The People's tribunal will be organized by several civil society organizations at the auditorium of the Calcutta University Institute on 31.1.2007 between 11 am to 4 pm.

We cordially invite your participation.

Participation in Training on Agro biodiversity And Agro biotechnology And Their Relation To Food Security.”

Food, Trade and Nutrition Coalition the (FTN) works for the progressive realization of the universal rights to adequate food and health. It promotes and advocates consumers” and producers” interests, particularly the vulnerable and poor women, men and children. FTN Coalition-Asia focuses on capacity building of partners, voluntary organisations and civil society organisations (CSOs) on areas of FTN’s interest including GMOs for sustained interventions in the region in future so that:

- FTN coalition partners aim to become credible sources of information on core areas
- Capacity is built at the level of the partners as well as the target populations, which should include CSOs and Voluntary Organisations (VOs), scientists and academics, government departments and bureaucracy, students and farmers.
- Advocacy skills are developed to engage the ; political class, especially key legislators.

In view of these objectives, FTN Asia organised a training programme on “Agrobiodiversity And Agrobiotechnology And Their Relation To Food Security.” The training programme was organised at Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) Bangkok, Thailand from November 27-29, 2006.

Well attended, enthusiastic participants from most Asian countries were motivated to learn in the course of this workshop. On behalf of FIAN West Bengal, Ms. Parama Ukil participated in the workshop. Resource persons of high caliber brought technical expertise, social and economic issues and public concerns.

The key issues discussed in the training were Agrobiodiversity, Relation between agrobiodiversity and food technology, Conservation of agrobiodiversity, Agrobiotechnology, Relation between agrobiotechnology and food security, Green Revolution, Gene Revolution and Intellectual Property Rights, National and International regulation of GE crops.



The training programme will help to build up the possibility of networking with FTN Coalition. FIAN West Bengal works to ensure the right to food and the issues of agrobiodiversity and agrobiotechnology are very crucial in this respect. FIAN West Bengal wants to work in joint cooperation in the near future to strengthen the network.

By Parama Ukil

FIAN West Bengal

MID DAY MEAL SCHEME IN WESTBENGAL

The National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education popularly known as the Mid-day Meal Scheme made its maiden appearance on 15th of August 1995, with certain definite objectives in view.

Firstly, it was aimed at giving a great fillip to universalisation of Primary education, by increasing enrollment, attendance and at the primary level.

The target group was all the students at the primary level [I-V] in the government local body and in government aided schools. The programme has also been recently extended to the children studying in EGS and in alternative learning centers.

This proposition to provide students with mid-day meals in order to attract more students is an encouraging move. But there is also an urgent need to improve the quality of education being provided for if the quality of education is poor present schemes like mid-day meal will do precious little to improve the future of the children.

However this landmark order by the Supreme Court was one of the first concrete achievements of the Right to Food Campaign. The intervention of the Supreme Court compelled state governments to implement the Mid-day Meal Scheme and it is expected to increase enrollment in schools and at the same time decrease the rate of Child Labour. Some of the states, which had earlier ignored the order, are now struggling to meet the deadline. Bihar, Jharkhand, Assam that had previously only partially implemented the Khichdi scheme, as it is known popularly has now extended it to the whole territory.

The good news is that in village after village this scheme is leading to higher enrolment and fewer dropouts.

Narayan Kumar, a project director for an NGO operating in Bihar and Jharkhand agrees that enrolment in schools have gone up by 50 percent. He also added that where the awareness is greater the implementation is better. He also said that although there were schools in almost every village now there was no arrangement for the proper monitoring of the mid-day meal scheme. According to some human rights activist, even in districts where the scheme was there implementation was much less than what was expected. Activist –economist Jean Derze, who has been fighting for the Right to Food is of the opinion that ground realities, is of varying nature in various states. He said that it takes some time to put into effect mid-day meal schemes as in the initial stages there will be ‘teething problems’ to contend with. Unquestionably, there are many impediments in the way of implementation of the scheme.

There is an acute shortage of grain and funds. There is not enough grain and not even enough money. Transportation of food grain is another crucial problem the school faces. The State Food Corporation happens to be the nodal agency, which is supposed to drop grain at the very doorstep of the school. But by all means the children or the village Panchayat are made to bear the cost of transportation of food grains. Transport costs are a problem in Bihar too. Another problem, which has come in the way of implementation of the programme, is the non-availability of water. The children go home to wash their hands after the lunch and invariably do not return to school and as a result the main purpose of the meal is defeated.

The quality of the food being provided is another major issue. Maharashtra may have implemented the scheme in its entirety but still there are problems involving monitoring and quality.

Sumita Kulkarni, an activist with CRY said, “ We have interventions in Marathwada, Vidarbha, Northern Maharashtra and a few urban areas and we find the political will to uphold child rights is missing. The scheme works on paper but is mostly eyewash. The responsibility of cooking is shifted entirely on to the teachers or delegated to the older children. The food served is often substandard.”

Shobha Murti, an activist in the Navi Mumbai municipality area said, food is being cooked but there is not enough of it. There are a number of children working in the markets here. If we had a decent meal in place, we could draw them to the schools. But an effective system is not in place even after three years.”

Jean Dreze says that the mid-day meals impact on child health is still a questionable issue. “The quality of meals is inadequate.”

Apart from this with enrolments in schools being on the rise dearth of funds are also going to be a stumbling block in the way of implementation of the programme. In Madhya Pradesh, for example lack of funds is causing attendance worries in the schools.

FIAN W B is deeply concerned with this issue and feels that proper monitoring of the Mid May Meal Scheme is the need of the hour. There is no point denying that an important milestone has been reached through the mid-day meal scheme but a careful vigilance and gradual upgrading of the programme is absolutely necessary.

The Supreme Court says “the responsibility of monitoring the implementation of the scheme essentially lies with central government as it is the central government that is providing the assistance”

One truth, which emerges loud and clear in this whole discussion, is that judicial intervention is utterly important in fighting for pro-poor policies. We find the same words being echoed in Jean Dreze’s words when he says that “it is hard to imagine how mid-day meals could have been extended to 100 million children within 3 years without the firm intervention of the Supreme Court” and we all perhaps agree with him on this count when we say that “HUNGER IS NOT A PROBLEM OF MEANS BUT OF RIGHTS”



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