

BHOPAL : HUNGER STRIKERS ARRESTED

Sansad

Five Bhopali hunger striker –Rasheeda Bee, Rachna Dhingra, Jabbar Khan, Guddi Bee, and Shehzadi Bee—were forcibly arrested by two truckloads of policemen at 7am on March 17 in Bhopal, India. The Bhopal District Collector, Mr B K Mishra, admitted to issuing the orders to remove the hunger strikers and said charges of attempted suicide may be pressed on the strikers. The hunger strikers were on the thirteenth day of an indefinite fast as part of sit-in protests called “Right to Live” which began on 20th February. Rachna Dhingra was still sleeping when they grabbed her by her hands and feet and violently removed her. Threats of rape were made against other women protestors by the state police. Reports from Bhopal’s Hamidia Hospital indicated that attempts were on to strap the resisting hunger strikers to beds to force feed them.

In Washington DC Non-resident Indians, students and other concerned groups of the Indian diaspora held loud protests outside the Indian Embassy in Washington DC on March 15th. Solidarity fasts by over 10 hunger strikers are being held in front of the embassy for the next two days (17th and 18th March) in support of the survivors in Bhopal. In solidarity with the protesting Bhopalis, concerned citizens across the country are taking part in an indefinite relay fast which will continue as long as the Bhopal survivors stay on their hunger strike.

Professor Mohan Bhagat, at the University of Maryland, says: “As Indians living in the diaspora we hang our heads in shame when about an India that claims to be a big player on the world scene, but at the cost of spilling the blood of her own people.” Somu Kumar, on a fast in Washington DC, says, “The fact that six Bhopal survivors are in a hunger-strike for last 13 days for the most basic of all needs—clean-drinking water, is appalling; more worrying is that Madhya Pradesh Government is turning a blind-eye”. Arun Gopalan, president of the Maryland chapter of AID, is outraged, “Do we want India to shine with the blood of its town citizens?” he said in reference to recent violence in Nandigram and Bhopal, and the “India Shining” campaign of BJP—in power in Madhya Pradesh State.

“Force-feeding is an act of violence and a violation of the Bhopalis’ human rights,” said Ryan Bodanyi, the Coordinator of Students for Bhopal. “The Bhopalis are fasting to save lives. If the government wants the same, they can start by agreeing to the Bhopalis’ demands, such as access to poison-free drinking water and competent medical care for Carbide’s victims.”

Over the last twenty-five days, international supporters of the Bhopal campaign have sent over two thousand faxes to the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh. Over four hundred phone calls have been made to various state government officials. Bhopal survivors in India have called a nationwide agitation towards the Madhya Pradesh government, resolving not to end the strike until their demands are met.

In April of 2006, the Prime Minister of India Manmohan Singh conceded to survivors’ demands for clean water, environmental rehabilitation, and economic and medical rehabilitation. The Union Ministry of Chemicals said that the state government has not responded to repeated reminders asking for an update on the progress of commitments made by the State in the meetings of the Coordination Committee on Bhopal. The protestors demand proper medical care, clean drinking water, containment of toxic wastes, pension for widows and families with congenially disabled children, economic rehabilitation, and protection from Union Carbide’s poison; that have killed and maimed for 22 years. Current Carbide owner Dow Chemical so far has refused to clean up the site. One of the hunger strikers, Goldman Environmental Prize winner Rashida Bee, lost six family members to cancer and herself has suffered from chronic health problems ever since the disaster.

On December 2, 1984, thousands of people in Bhopal, India, were gassed to death after a catastrophic chemical leak at a Union Carbide pesticide plant. Advocates say Carbide’s owner Dow Chemical is to blame for daily deaths in Bhopal, due to its refusal to clean up the disaster site and provide adequate care to the survivors. Over 22,000 people have died in the aftermath of the disaster and over six hundred thousand have been affected.

Union Carbide’s internal documents show the company cut corners on safety and maintenance to save money. On the night of the disaster none of the six safety systems at the Union Carbide plant were functional. Following a partial 1989 settlement, Union Carbide fled India, leaving behind unresolved criminal liabilities and several thousand metric tons of

hazardous waste, which has poisoned the drinking water for Bhopal residents. Dow Chemical Company claims it has no responsibility for the ongoing deaths. Amnesty International termed Dow's behavior as a fundamental violation of the Bhopais' human rights. Eighteen members of the US Congress signed a letter to Dow in 2003, calling Dow's behavior a "blatant disregard for the law." □□□

LETTER

IN THE WAKE OF NANDIGRAM

The valiant struggle of the peasantry in Nandigram against the acquisition of their land and homesteads for the proposed chemical hub SEZ has drawn nationwide attention. Despite the massacre of March 14 and the continuing reign of terror unleashed by the police and hired killers of the ruling party in the state, Nandigram has refused to surrender. On the contrary, it has sparked unprecedented mass protests across West Bengal and elsewhere. People's movements in various parts of the country against the forcible acquisition of farmlands, forests and other natural resource base of the poor in the name of SEZ and for the so-called industrial projects have also drawn inspiration and sustenance from Nandigram. No wonder, Nandigram has become a major focus of people's resistance against the neo-liberal agenda that seeks to establish the hegemony of global corporate capitalism.

Time is now ripe to bring all the people's resistance movements across the country together under one coordinating network. Towards this end, we the undersigned are proposing a People's Convention, in Kolkata on 2-3 June 2007 (before the onset of monsoon). We call upon all our friends in the people's movements and people's organisations, irrespective of political or ideological moorings, to come forward and actively participate in this programme. May the convention/rally become the launching pad for a united nationwide struggle against the government's land acquisition policy for SEZ and industrial projects.

The convention/rally, and the countrywide movement to be launched from there, will be raising the following demands:

1. Scrap the SEZ policy that aims to set up 'extra-territorial' authorities within the country and acquire huge tracts of farm and forest lands for the corporate capitalists while endangering the lives and livelihoods of millions.
2. Abolish or reformulate the colonial and draconian Land Acquisition Act of 1894 that served as the chief instrument of land acquisition.
3. The Chief Minister of West Bengal, who has owned up to the responsibility for the mass murders in Nandigram, must resign. Everyone who has had a hand in the Nandigram massacre, directly or indirectly, must be suitably punished.
4. People's institutions at the grassroots must be allowed the autonomy to act so that Nandigram can return to a life of peace and human dignity.

In solidarity.

Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, Surendra Mohan, Samir Amin, Anand Kumar, Hari P. Sharma, Apporvanand, Arundhati Roy, Uma Chakravarty, Rakesh Rafiq, Mukul Sinha, Anil Chaudhury, Vaskar Nandy, Sumit Chaudhary, Aditya Nigam, Nivedita Menon, Amit Bhaduri, Praful Bidwai, Gautam Navlakha, Ranjana Padhi, Prashant Bhusan, Richa Singh and many others