

Press Release:

International Fact Finding Mission investigated and condemned the imminent displacement and destruction of livelihoods of poor in Dankuni and Mahhisadal, West Bengal due to Special economic Zones

Kolkata, 26.07.2008 -, An International fact-finding mission, comprising eminent civil society representatives from Thailand, Nepal, Bangladesh and other states of India, visited Dankuni and Mahisadal in West Bengal and expressed great concern over the imminent displacement and loss of livelihoods of poor and landless communities in those areas due to construction of SEZs supported by the state government. The mission met with the villagers in the two above mentioned places and also met senior state representatives as well as representatives of ruling and opposition parties in those places and also in Kolkata.



The mission investigated and verified violations of the right to food & livelihood in Dankuni and Mahisadal and concluded with a set of observations and recommendations to the West Bengal government and the salient recommendations are as follows:

- Scrap the SEZ Act 2003 West Bengal & stop SEZ expansion at the cost of livelihoods of millions
- Develop alternative patterns of livelihood, generation of employment through participatory planning process
- Refrain from and oppose the displacement of the rural poor, Dalits, tribals, fisherfolk, women, children and marginalised people from their ancestral lands.

In Dankuni, Hooghly district the FFM team visited the proposed areas for the development of a township by MNC, DLF. The team met the representatives of affected villages and observed how the



rights of the poor people of more than 20 villages were undermined and violated due to the construction of SEZ in their locality. This SEZ is being developed by DLF, the largest real-estate company of India and the state government is facilitating the process by providing land and infrastructure facilities to this company at a throw away price. According to the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority(KMDA) the project area is 4,840acres (19.61 km²) of which 4,063acres (16.47 km²) is township area and 777 acres (3.14 km²) is earmarked as industrial area. The project area covers 20 mouzas including five full villages and 15 part villages, spread

across four police stations, namely Dankuni, Chanditala, Singur and Serampore.

The team observed that the majority of the inhabitants in Dankuni, living close to the proposed township site, are poor and marginalized farmers, landless agricultural labourers, and migrant labourers including large number of women. Besides that small shop keeper, vendors and small business people were also deriving their livelihoods from the agrarian economy of the area. Due to the construction of this SEZ and fencing of nearby lands the poor people from more than 20 villages had no access to nearby grazing grounds, fields and water bodies, which resulted into chronic hunger and malnutrition. These poor families were landless and had very poor assets for pursuing a safe and sustainable livelihood. Despite their repeated appeal for receiving land through land reform, little had been done by the state. The FFM team was told that on the contrary vast tracts of lands, surrounding the villages, were given to SEZ by the government, making it impossible for these families to derive their livelihoods. The families also lost employment as agricultural labourers when the government turned over the agricultural lands to the SEZ. The FFM team further observed that there were no employment opportunities for these unskilled people in the newly constructed SEZ, more so as this would mainly be residential complexes.

The FFM team concluded that expansion of SEZ restricted the access of the poor people to agricultural land; CPR like common land, grazing grounds and nearby water bodies and limited their income opportunities to a great extent. These restrictions resulted into hunger and starvations leading to violations of right to food and livelihood. No affected family received any compensation/rehabilitation from the state for their sufferings. Furthermore the whole expansion of SEZ was done without any consultation with the local people. In brief these landless Dalit families remained invisible in the 'development' planning of the state government in this area but they became helpless victims of such development process.

On the basis of these observations, the preliminary recommendations of the fact-finding mission in Dankuni include the following:

- ❖ The SEZ in Dankuni should be immediately stopped
- ❖ Violation of right to food of these poor people should be immediately stopped and the government should take immediate measures to ensure safe and secure livelihoods for these families by providing them with appropriate support with an immediate effect.
- ❖ The rights of these landless families to receive adequate compensation/rehabilitation for the loss of livelihoods should be duly acknowledged and enforced by the state without further delay.
- ❖ The land should be given to landless families on a priority basis and the state should refrain from playing the role of intermediary in the land market between the big companies and the land owners for developing SEZ.

In Mahisadal the mission met the villagers, the support group of the villagers who were protesting against land acquisition, Gram Panchayet members, BDO and other local government representatives. The Mission observed that due to the development of SEZ more than 16 villages were facing threats of imminent eviction and altogether 16 Mouzas and more than 6000 households were exposed to the threats of livelihood losses. In Mahisadal (Purba Midnapore) Ramky Infrastructure Ltd. proposed to set up a multi production SEZ for Pharmaceuticals, Chemical and Biotechnology Center, spanning over 1012 hectares of land. And the state is sponsoring this SEZ by providing all sorts of supports, including land

These villages were mainly inhabited by poor landless/ near landless backward class communities engaged in agriculture as marginal farmers, sharecroppers or agricultural labourers and as traditional fisher folks who had poor access to social and economic assets and entitlements. They depended largely on shared land, Common Property Resources (CPR) and fishing for survival. The eviction would result into complete destruction of their livelihoods and would expose them to extreme vulnerable conditions.

The state government had plan of adequate rehabilitation for the victims of also true that the victims were and livelihoods for corporate rehabilitation/compensation them by the state. Moreover, followed how in Singur (and rehabilitation packages were possessed land title and the actors who derived



not proposed any concrete compensation and/or imminent evictions. It was not ready to give up their land profits, even if some packages were offered to the villagers in Mahisadal had partly in Nandigram) only received by those who thousands of other poor livelihoods from the agrarian

economy never received any compensation for the total loss of their livelihoods.

The FFM team observed that these poor villagers were kept in dark about the construction of the SEZ in this area during the planning, approval and initial phase of allotment of land and no consultation took place at grassroots to enable them to voice their opinions.

It was further observed by the FFM team that despite several petitions of the villagers, the state authorities did not pay any attention to their pleas of abandoning the idea of developing the SEZ there. FFM team observed that Mahisadal was a fertile agrarian zone and the government should take initiative to develop the agrarian economy of that area by implementing Genuine Agrarian Reform (GAR) measures to its fullest extent. Villagers also demanded for land and financial assistances from the state to pursue their livelihoods in a better way; but these demands failed to generate any response.

The FFM team concluded that the new SEZ would create very little employment opportunities for the local people as this would be highly mechanized and the activities in the SEZ would result into large-scale pollution of surrounding environments.

In brief the FFM team concluded that construction of SEZ and acquisition/conversion of agricultural land for that purpose would seriously violate the Right to Food (RTF) of thousands of households in more than 16 villages in Mahisadal by restricting their access to food and food producing resources and by polluting these resources.

On the basis of these observations, the preliminary recommendations of the FFM in Mahisadal include the following:

- ❖ The violation of RTF should be immediately stopped in and around Mahisadal by restricting further land acquisition/conversion for proposed SEZ there.
- ❖ The SEZ project should be abandoned in Mahisadal owing to great potential of loss of livelihoods and large scale environmental pollution.
- ❖ The rights of these landless and traditional families over Common Property Resources (CPR) should be duly acknowledged and reinstated.
- ❖ The victims of violations of rights in the above villages should be adequately compensated and rehabilitated. Rehabilitation should be adequate in economic, social and cultural terms.
- ❖ All development planning in this region should ensure effective participation of the villagers with a focus on participation of marginalized communities like the tribal and Dalit groups. Panchayet should be effectively consulted and all local development projects should be approved by the Panchayets.
- ❖ GAR measures should be immediately implemented in Mahisadal to empower the poor to derive a profitable livelihood through agriculture with dignity
- ❖ State should refrain from violations against the human rights defenders in Mahisadal and should oblige with its constitutional and international human rights commitment's to secure livelihoods of poor with topmost priority and maximum available resources.

The SEZ company should be show caused by the state for invading into peoples resources and for violation of RTF of the poor in Mahisadal

Conclusion

The FFM team is urging the government to rethink the SEZ policy and to incorporate a participatory mechanism of social, economic, cultural and environmental impact assessment process, the outcome of which should be made available in public domain. When the FFM team met Sri. Kshiti Goswami, the Honourable Minister of PWD Government West Bengal on 26th July, he assured the team that the Government would reconsider the SEZ policy to uphold the interest of the common people.

Moreover, the FFM team is of opinion that the state should give due emphasis on strengthening the capacity of the poor to pursue livelihoods by providing them with resources, assistance and by facilitating their access to productive resources/environment. The macro economic policy of the state should not jeopardise the livelihoods of millions at micro level. **While the FFM team appreciates the concern and attempt of the left parties in India to stop the nuclear deal with US in order to safeguard the sovereignty of the nation, at the same time the FFM team is highly concerned to see the steps taken by the left government in West Bengal to develop the foreign enclaves in the name of SEZ in its own territory, which is self-contradictory and which would certainly lead to destruction of sovereign power of the state over a period of time and would jeopardise all human rights norms and values.** The FFM team urges the state to emphasise on people and planet over profit (in the era of the climate change debate, the environmental concern should be given due attention) and to uphold democratic and human rights norms and principles.

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