



Housing and Land Rights Network



National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights

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## PRESS RELEASE:

### Urgent need to protect human rights of POSCO-affected villagers and prevent violence

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*Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN)* and *National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR)* are concerned about the repressive measures being resorted to by the Government of Odisha against the people of Jagatsinghpur district, who have been peacefully resisting the forced acquisition of their lands for the POSCO project.

The POSCO project has been a source of controversy since the Memorandum of Understanding was signed in 2005 between the Government of Odisha and Korea-based company POSCO, the world's fourth largest steel producer. The project represents India's largest single foreign direct investment to date and involves the construction of a large steel plant, coal-fired thermal power plant, a captive port, and iron-ore mining site. Just the construction of the steel plant requires the acquisition of 4004 acres of land, much of it prime agricultural and forest land that is home to villagers who earn their livelihoods by rice farming, fishing and cultivating betel leaves and nuts. The project would result in the displacement of thousands while threatening their lives and livelihoods and violating multiple human rights. The peaceful resistance to the project over the last six years has, however, been met with a range of repressive and undemocratic measures from the state.

The past few weeks have witnessed a growing police presence and an imminent threat of force and violence against the residents of the area. It is apparent that the state administration, with the covert support of the central government at the Centre, has conspired to appease a corporate entity; in complete disregard for human rights and democracy.

Reports from Odisha indicate that residents of Dinkia, Govindpur and Noliashahi villages, including women and children, are greatly threatened by police forces. Since June 10, 2011, in an attempt to acquire village lands, senior police officers have been terrorizing the people and threatening *lathi* charges and the use of brute force. While the villagers' resistance has been non-violent and peaceful, they continue to face grave risks to their health and safety, and live in constant fear.

A fact-finding mission by NCDHR on April 11 and 12, 2011, revealed that a significant proportion (35-40%) of the affected population in these villages is Dalit, subsisting mainly on betel vine, cashew cultivation and fishing. Their dependence on forest land is critical to their lives and livelihoods. According to *Paul Divakar, General Secretary, NCDHR*, "The human rights of Dalits have been blatantly violated in the POSCO project villages. An embargo type of situation has been created in these villages through police terror to suppress the peaceful resistance of the people."

There are allegedly close to 1,100 warrants pending against villagers from over 176 cases filed against them for their peaceful resistance to protect their lives and livelihoods. Of these cases, 300 are against women; 100 against Dalit women. The imposition of false charges against the villagers has made it very difficult for them to access basic services such as healthcare. It is reportedly becoming difficult for residents of the affected villages to marry, and visits to homes of relatives in other villages are restricted. During times of resistance and tension, which is frequent, students are unable to attend school and college, which violates their right to education.

NCDHR and HLRN note with concern that the POSCO project received clearance from the Centre despite the findings of three official committees that established serious violations of India's Forest Rights Act 2006.

According to *Shivani Chaudhry, Associate Director, HLRN*, "The state government is clearly defending corporate interest as "public interest" in order to promote the POSCO project." She adds that, "It is imperative that the government first obtains the prior informed consent of the people and does not resort to any force or violence to acquire their lands against their will."

*Dr. Srivella Prasad, NCDHR*, states, "The haste with which the government is moving forward with land acquisition for the project even when there are cases pending in the Orissa High Court, reveals a deep-rooted state-corporate nexus."

*Miloon Kothari, Executive Director, HLRN, and former United Nations Special Rapporteur*, emphasises that, "The Government of Odisha as well as the central government must adhere to national, constitutional and international law, including international guidelines such as the *UN Basic Principles and Guidelines on Development-based Evictions and Displacement*, to ensure that human rights of the affected villagers are protected. Given the imminent violations of the rights to adequate housing, land, work/livelihood, food, and health, it is important for institutions such as the National Human Rights Commission to urgently conduct independent investigations to inform the government."

HLRN and NCDHR call upon the state and central government to:

- immediately withdraw police forces from the area;
- desist from any violent or coercive measures to intimidate the people who are resisting peacefully in order to protect their lives, livelihoods, habitat, and environment;
- uphold India's international and national environmental and human rights obligations, including the Constitution of India and Forest Rights Act 2006;
- conduct independent social and eviction impact assessments to determine the real costs of the POSCO project; and,
- undertake investigations and action against police and other state officials responsible for acts of terror and violence against the villagers.

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