



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh Protest to Stop Open Pit Coal Mine 2006-2014

26 August

2006

to: 6 February

2014

Country: Bangladesh

Location City/State/Province: *Phulbari*

Goals:

Stop open pit coal mine

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 039. Parades › Protesters paraded through the streets of the city to show dissatisfaction with the proposed mine.
- 045. Demonstrative funerals › Protesters created a public funeral for three activists killed by paramilitary forces.
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › Protesters assembled near the mine site to oppose the open pit mine.
- 117. General strike › Protesters organized a four-day general strike in the region in response to paramilitary violence on protesters.
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › During the strike protesters blockaded car traffic in and out of the region and stopped rail traffic.

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support › Activists sent letters to investors asking them to withdraw money from mining project.
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › Activists displayed information honoring the deaths of their fellow activists killed by paramilitary forces.
- 039. Parades › Protesters paraded through the streets of the city to show dissatisfaction with the proposed mine.
- 046. Homage at burial places › Protesters commemorated three activists killed by paramilitary forces.
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › Protesters assembled near the mine site to oppose the open pit mine.

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › Activists displayed information honoring the deaths of their fellow activists killed by paramilitary forces.
- 039. Parades › Protesters paraded through the streets of the city to show dissatisfaction with the proposed mine.
- 043. Political mourning › Allied group held a protest commemorating the deaths of activists several years before that was held on a local university campus.
- 046. Homage at burial places › Protesters commemorated three activists killed by paramilitary forces.

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › Protesters assembled near the mine site to oppose the open pit mine.

Methods in 4th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support › Activists sent letters to Bangladesh Prime Minister asking him to withdraw support from mining project.
- 002. Letters of opposition or support › Activists sent letters to investors asking them to withdraw money from mining project.
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › Activists displayed information honoring the deaths of their fellow activists killed by paramilitary forces.
- 039. Parades › Protesters paraded through the streets of the city to show dissatisfaction with the proposed mine.
- 041. Pilgrimages › Tens of thousands of protesters joined a 7-day, 250-mile march across the region to protest the mining project.
- 046. Homage at burial places › Protesters commemorated three activists killed by paramilitary forces.
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › Protesters assembled near the mine site to oppose the open pit mine.
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › 2000 protesters blockaded a highway in the region and asked the government to honor the agreement they had made years earlier.
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › Activists joined regional anti-coal activists to blockade highways and railways into the region.

Methods in 5th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support › Activists sent letters to investors asking them to withdraw money from the mining project.
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions › UN human rights experts sent report to Bangladesh government advising them not to allow the mining project to go forward.
- 004. Signed public statements › Protesters called on the government to oppose the mining project.
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols › Activists created and burned an effigy of the United States Ambassador to Bangladesh.
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › Activists displayed information honoring the deaths of their fellow activists killed by paramilitary forces.
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects › Campaigners delivered coal to the CEO of the largest investor for the mining project.
- 039. Parades › Protesters paraded through the streets of the city to show dissatisfaction with the proposed mine.
- 046. Homage at burial places › Protesters commemorated three activists killed by paramilitary forces.
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › Activists in London protested outside the annual shareholders' meeting for Asia Energy Corporation.
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › Protesters assembled near the mine site to oppose the open pit mine.
- 117. General strike › Activists organized a two-day general strike in the region in response to a law that prevented assembly.
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws › Activists assembled despite a new law that said that gatherings of more than four people were illegal.
- 170. Nonviolent invasion › Protesters invaded areas that had been blocked off by police fences.
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › Activists blockaded road and railways into the region in connection with the general strike.

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches › Allies made speeches at a memorial for activists killed by paramilitary forces.
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention › Activists delivered ultimatums to Asia Energy Corporation saying that they would destroy the company's offices unless they vacated the country.
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › Activists displayed information honoring the deaths of their fellow activists killed by paramilitary forces.

- 038. Marches › Two different groups of activists marched to deliver ultimatums to Asia Energy Corporation.
- 039. Parades › Protesters paraded through the streets of the city to show dissatisfaction with the proposed mine.
- 046. Homage at burial places › Protesters commemorated three activists killed by paramilitary forces.
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › Activists assembled outside a shareholders' meeting of Asia Energy Corporation.
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › Protesters assembled near the mine site to oppose the open pit mine.

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Environment

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- indigenous groups

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Professor Anu Muhammad

Mr. Nuruzuman

SMA Khaleque

Aminul Bablu

Joy Prakash Gupta

Shikder Sarker

Syed Saiful Islam Jewel

Murtoza Sharker Manik

Samina Luthfa

Partners:

Samajtantrik Chhatra Front

Jatiya Gana Front

Barapukaria region anti-coal activists

Phulbari Peshajibi Sangathan

External allies:

National Indigenous Union

Jatiya Gana Front

London Mining Network

United Nations human rights experts

Cultural Survival

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Jatiya Gana Front
- Samajtantrik Chhatra Front

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Barapukaria region anti-coal activists
- Cultural Survival

Groups in 5th Segment:

- London Mining Network
- United Nations independent human rights experts

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Phulbari Peshajibi Sangathan

Segment Length: 13 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Asia Energy Corporation (now Global Coal Management)

Bangladesh Power and Energy Ministry

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Killing of three protesters, public torture of local leader, publicly breaking hands of local leader, injuring protesters

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Campaigners have stopped the mine for now and seem to be preventing its development by maintaining a threat of action but the threat of the mine has not been eliminated. Campaigners have maintained their infrastructure throughout the long campaign. The campaigners were just as able to carry out a general strike at the end of the campaign as they were at the beginning of the campaign. They received a 2 rather than a 3 on growth because the number of allies signing letters to investors decreased from 110 in 2008 to 80 in 2011.

Phulbari is a region in the northwest region of Bangladesh. It is an important agricultural region that is also home to low quality coal deposit. Several companies have proposed to use the open pit technique for mining the coal, which would displace thousands of people, many of them indigenous people. The proposed mining projects would destroy farmland, homes, and divert water sources to be used in the mining process.

The Australia-based mining company BHP Billiton discovered coal at Phulbari during surveying and drilling between 1994 and 1997. In 2005, BHP Billiton assessed Phulbari's coal mining potential and decided to sell its rights to mine to London-based Asia Energy Corporation after concluding that the depth of the coal deposits would make mining activity so destructive that it would not be feasible to comply with Australia's environmental standards or those of any nation worldwide.

Asia Energy Corporation bought the rights to mine and proposed an open pit mine project in 2005. Asia Energy Corporation estimated that the mining project would take 36 years to mine the deposit, extracting up to 8 million tons of coal per year.

The Bangladesh Department of Environment granted the project "Environmental Clearance for Mining" on 11 September 2005. In order for the project to move ahead, the Government of Bangladesh had to officially approve the project proposal.

On 26 August 2006, 50,000 people marched in protest against the proposed mining project. The Bangladesh Rifles, a paramilitary organization, fired on the protesters and killed 3 people. Between one and two hundred other protesters were injured.

In response to the violence, one protester said, "We will give our lives, but we will not leave this place. We will not allow the mine to happen. The government can take as many dead bodies as they want, we won't leave the village. And no one from Asia Energy will come here again. They won't even be able to enter this area. We will fight."

On 28 August 2006, in response to the paramilitary violence, protesters organized a national strike that shut the country down for four days. The protesters and their strike closed shops, offices, educational institutions, and roadways in the Dinajpur district.

The people ended their strike on 31 August 2006 when the Bangladesh government signed a six-point agreement to: ban open pit mining in Phulbari, institute peoples' ownership over their own resources, ensure energy security, cancel bad deals, ban the export of mineral resources and strengthen national capability ban open-pit mining in Phulbari and exclude Asia Energy Corporation from the country.

Asia Energy Corporation suspended its operations due to the strike and its personnel fled the country under police escort.

Despite the August agreement that ended the strike, the leadership of the national movement opposed to the mine – the National

Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, and Ports – believed that the renewal of mining at Phulbari remained a possibility.

A local leader of the national movement opposing the mine, Mr. Nuruzuman, was publically tortured by the Bangladesh military early the next year, February 2007. Asia Energy Corporation also changed its name to Global Coal Management Plc or GCM Plc, with its Bangladesh subsidiary taking the name Asia Energy Corporation (Bangladesh) Plc Ltd, hereafter referred to as AEC (Bangladesh) or Asia Energy.

On 26 August 2008 protesters held a vigil to honor the protesters that died as a result of repressive violence in 2006.

In August 2008, 110 organizations worldwide signed a letter to companies invested in the open pit mine project calling on the companies to end their investments. On 8 October 2008 Royal Bank of Scotland, Barclays Bank and the Asian Development Bank sold their shares in GCM Plc, distancing themselves from the project. AEC (Bangladesh) apparently re-opened its offices in Bangladesh, although the timing is unclear.

On 10 March 2009 the Bangladesh government's energy division reported that they had lost the report of a government-formed expert committee that had found that GCM's agreement with the government was illegal and that an open pit mine at the field would not be viable.

On 26 August 2009 several socio-political organizations observed Phulbari Day to commemorate the violence against protesters in 2006. During the commemoration in 2009, protesters placed flowers at public locations to remember the protesters who died in an attack on the protests.

An allied organization, the Jatiya Gana Front held a rally and procession through Muktangan and published a statement to the government saying that any move towards open pit mining in Bangladesh would be stopped. The Samajtantrik Chhatra Front led a similar protest honoring the activists who were killed in 2006 on the Dhaka University campus. The activists demanded the expulsion once again of Asia Energy from Bangladesh.

In October 2010, tens of thousands of protesters joined a 7-day, 250-mile march to protest the Phulbari Coal Project.

On 28 February 2011, 2,000 protesters blockaded a highway in the Phulbari region and demanded that the government honor the six-point agreement they signed in August 2006. The Bangladesh government deployed Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion to intimidate protesters and guard the office of Global Coal Management. This Rapid Action Battalion has been denounced by international human rights organizations as a government death squad because of its routine use of torture and extra-judicial killings.

In February 2011 Cultural Survival, an organization that partners with indigenous peoples to defend their cultures, launched a letter-writing campaign asking the Bangladesh Prime Minister to stop the Phulbari coal project.

The next month the government announced the formation of an Expert Committee to finalize a draft coal policy, postponing decisions on whether to ban open pit mining in the country or to approve the Phulbari coal project.

On 5 May 2011 the National Committee reported that local protesters, including women and children, were attacked by "some hooligans backed by the minister" while they were demonstrating their opposition to the Phulbari mine. Local people were also attacked in the nearby Barapukaria coal mine region where the Bangladesh government had proposed a national "pilot project" for open pit mining in the region. These government-backed attackers publically broke the hands of a National Committee leaders.

Nevertheless, groups of protesters remained in place and blocked key roads and railway lines until 10 am on 6 May 2011 with the support of participants from the Phulbari region.

On 20 October 2011, 80 international organizations sent a letter to remaining Phulbari investors, asking them to withdraw their

investments from the proposed project, outlining the human rights violations and environmental risks associated with the open pit mining project.

On 17 December 2011, London Mining Network, an organization that targets the funders of mining projects to stop their funding, protested outside the annual shareholders meeting of GCM. In the meeting, an activist named Samina Luthfa presented the Chairman of GCM, with an “eviction notice” requesting that the company leave Bangladesh immediately.

On 28 February 2012 United Nations independent human rights experts requested that the Bangladesh government not start open pit mining operations because of the human rights violations involved in the Phuldari mining project.

On 7 May 2012 police attacked and beat demonstrators calling for a ban on open pit mining and demanding renewable energy projects. 15 of the protesters were injured.

On 26 August 2012 thousands of protesters took part in a Phulbari Day rally commemorating the protesters that were killed in 2006.

About two months later, on 9 November 2012 the National Committee called on the government to expel the mining company from Bangladesh.

Later that same month, 23 November, Bangladesh government authorities imposed Section 144, banning gatherings of more than four people indefinitely in an effort to stop the movement.

Thousands protested in the streets of Phulbari, breaking through police barricades to take to the streets. The campaigners declared a two-day general strike, halting trains, blocking roads, and closing businesses and schools. During the strike, on 24 November 2012, protesters burned an effigy of Dan Mozena, the United States Ambassador to Bangladesh. Mozena was chosen because in 2012 it became clear that the United States had been lobbying the Bangladesh government to push the open pit mine project through. Wikileaks initially revealed this information in 2009 with their leak of United States State Department diplomatic cables.

On 10 December 2012 Bangladesh government officials called the approval of the open pit mine “unlikely” during their government’s tenure, which would last through late 2013.

On 1 January 2013 protesters in Phulbari asked Asia Energy to vacate their local offices in Bangladesh by 30 March 2013. Protesters said that if the company did not meet their demand, the protesters would destroy the offices. Two organizations, the local unit of the National Committee and Phulbari Peshajibi Sangathan delivered the ultimatum to the company in two different rallies on 1 January 2013.

In January 2013, Polo Resources, the largest investor in the Phulbari coal project, announced that they were looking to sell their 30% stake in the project a month after protesters interrupted their December 2012 shareholders’ meeting to deliver coal to the company’s investors.

In late January 2013, Gary Lye, the CEO of AEC (Bangladesh) cancelled his planned trip to visit the mine’s proposed location to distribute blankets when protesters in the area held rallies showing that they would not allow Lye into the area. The District Commissioner of Dianjpur had been planning to meet with Lye on his visit to the area, but advised Lye not to come because of the protests.

On 27 January 2013 a Bangladesh parliamentary committee accused the British-based coal company GCM of failing to have a valid deal with the Bangladesh government for any exploration or mining in Phulbari since 2006.

Before two weeks had gone by, GCM's Finance Director, Graham Taggart, resigned amid a flurry of protests in London and Bangladesh. He retains a consulting position with GCM, now renamed GCM Resources Plc.

On 26 August 2013 activists commemorated Phulbari Day with rallies and speeches by activists in several different organizations opposed to open pit mining in Bangladesh.

On 4 December 2013 activists in London held a protest outside to the annual general meeting of Global Coal Management to demand that the company stop pursuing open pit mining in Bangladesh.

On 6 February 2014, in a meeting with the Power and Energy Ministry's top officials, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said: "Right now, we want to leave the issue of coal extraction to the future technology as food security and protecting the land of the farmers is the first priority."

Research Notes

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Additional Notes:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=PnpEJAZiwf0 (Not viewed)

The name Asia Energy Corporation appears to have been taken by a seemingly unrelated company in 2009. The subsidiary of GCM in Bangladesh is specifically Asia Energy Corporation (Bangladesh) Plc Ltd.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=MhdO9gmuAuk (Not viewed)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=R-ZEw-wmTTA (Not viewed)

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Andrés Cordero and Ryan Leitner 02/04/2014

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