

‘Don’t make Public Hearing into a Farce’
A Press Release on Public Hearing scheduled for 15th April
on Environment Impact Assessment on POSCO-proposed
mega projects at Jatadhar mouth near Paradip, Orissa

Now the whole world knows that from the day one the Naveen Patnaik Government in Orissa signed an MoU in June 2005 last with POSCO of South Korea for facilitating the latter to set up an export-oriented Integrated 12 MTPY Steel Plant and a Captive Marine Port at Jatadhar mouth near Paradip, the people belonging to the villages likely to be displaced have en masse raised their banner of revolt in unequivocal terms against the said deal. The people’s protest has so far assumed various forms, the most spectacular being the installation of wooden barricades at the entry point of the said villages with the declared aim to prevent any Government official or company personnel from trespassing into their area in connection with the proposed project. The chief allegation of the local people, over which the State Government has ever since been maintaining a typical silence is how the CM without holding any consultation with those local people likely to lose their home and livelihood could sacrifice to a foreign company just by a stroke of pen a good and precious stretch of State’s shoreline, estuary, rivers, protected forests and above all densely populated human habitations. The mainstream intelligentsia of the State have also remained quite vociferous against this controversial deal, since the latter, costing a total of 5,20,000 million rupees, the highest ever FDI investment in the country, not only requires as much as 4,004 acres of land to be acquired at the project site, but also allows POSCO an unbridled choice to exploit the best of the coal and iron ore mines of the State for a long period of 30 years besides a blank cheque to the Company to construct their own railways, roadways and an 86 km long pipe-line for carrying fresh water from Mahanadi barrage at Cuttack to salinity-prone project site at Jatadhar mouth.

While the people’s protest over the Posco projects continues to rage in its intensity on one hand, and the CM’s adamant disinclination to talk to the aggrieved locals hardens day by day on the other, one feels simply bewildered at the diversionary tactic that the Govt of Orissa has adopted of late so as to defuse the public wrath built up for long against the Posco-proposed mega projects. The said tactic consists in the sudden notification by the Orissa State Pollution Control Board of a Public Hearing on Posco-designed EIA Reports to be held on 15th of April at a place called Kujang, which is about 20-25 km. away from the project site. This choice of venue not only would prohibit the overwhelming bulk of the affected people from attending the public hearing, but also flagrantly violates the latest EIA Notification by GOI dated 14 Sept. 2006, which mandates that “The public hearing shall be arranged in a systematic, time-bound and transparent manner ensuring widest possible public participation at the project site(s) or in its close proximity”. Further, the said EIA Notification and as well the notice issued by the OSPCB on 15th March’07 assured that all the EIA Reports would be made available in both English and regional language at the concerned Panchayats so as to enable the common villagers to ventilate their informed opinions in course of the public hearing. But while the date of Public Hearing is round the corner, no such report has reached the

above destinations. Rather, in its place a letter of threat by the District Collector has been issued to the selected leaders of the anti-displacement agitation warning each of them that either they demolish all the obstructions in the form of barricades within 7 days or else face the dire consequences. This letter of threat has spread an implicit message of terror against all those who may be preparing themselves to speak critically of the POSCO EIA Reports at the public hearing. Further, the advertisement by OSPCB clearly says that comprehensive EIA Reports would be made available during the interim period in both hard and soft copies in the offices of District Collector, District Industries Centre and their own office inter alia for the purpose of dissemination among the public. But strangely enough, the OSPCB refuses to part with the soft copy of the Vol-2 (i.e. Field Reports, which is by far the most crucial part) of EIA Reports; the Office of District Collector provides no scope for a soft copy of any Report at all; and that of DIC has nothing to offer in any form. Besides an anomaly of fundamental nature has come to the fore meanwhile. While the GOI's above Notification insists on holding a public hearing on the comprehensive EIA Reports, the OSPCB is circulating only a Rapid version of the said reports. Again, contrary to the stipulated norm, a copy of the application made by the project proponent along with the Terms of Reference for EIA are also missing from the OSPCB's information package. To add to the list of anomalies, while the GOI's Notification obligates the concerned regulatory authority to hold a separate public hearing for each mega-project, OSPCB has clubbed several big, big projects- steel plant, marine port, mining of coal and ores, railways, highways and pipeline for water transport etc. (each differing though from the other in terms of basic parameters) together into one composite case to be covered by a single public hearing and that too on a single day. And the situation seems immeasurably complicated, when one finds that except the Rapid EIA of only two projects- Steel Plant and Marine Port- no information worth the name is available from any quarter on the other ancillary, but environmentally sensitive projects proposed by POSCO.

To cap it all, while the date of public hearing draws nearer and nearer, high-profile police officers of the State in uniform starting from DG himself are found to be frequenting the areas bordering on affected villages. What could be the game? Who knows, they may be surveying the logistics for re-enacting the infamous episodes of Kalinga Nagar or Nandigram here in this interior, not-so-accessible part of coastal Orissa. Under the circumstances, only a sudden and loud clamour in unison from all across the country in the name of people's inalienable right to live in their own land can cry a halt to the fast gathering possibility of a genocide being currently contemplated by the dizzy-headed Government of Mr. Naveen Patnaik

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On Behalf of Actionaid
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