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India: Probe allegations of excessive use of force against anti-dam protesters in Odisha

Authorities in the eastern Indian state of Odisha should order an independent and impartial inquiry into allegations of excessive use of police force on anti-dam protesters which injured 30 people in Bolangir district on 29 April, Amnesty International said today.

According to Amitabh Patra, a videojournalist and eyewitness, more than 1,000 protesters, including those belonging to the Lower Suktel Budi Anchal Sangram Parishad and Zilla Adivasi Kalyan Sangh who were armed with traditional weapons including sickles and bows, had assembled on the morning of 29 April to demonstrate against the lower Suktel irrigation project.

The protesters claimed that the project would displace more than 10,000 persons in 29 villages and was aimed at supplying water to industries rather than irrigating fields. Some of them were demanding payment of compensation for the land that authorities had already acquired from them.

The protesters tried to stop machinery belonging to the state-owned Odisha Construction Corporation from moving into the project site, demanding an immediate halt to work on the project. Following this, around 200 police personnel baton-charged the protesters, resulting in injuries to 30 protesters; at least 12 of them, including Amitabh Patra, required medical treatment.

Authorities also arrested 15 protesters, including Amitabh Patra, and charged them with defying orders prohibiting the assembly of more than four persons at the project site.

Amnesty International reminds the Odisha authorities that under the United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, police must use non-violent means before resorting to use of force. They must also use force only in proportion to the seriousness of the situation. The arbitrary or abusive use of force or firearms by law enforcement officials must be punished as a criminal offence.

Authorities in Odisha must ensure that all allegations of the use of arbitrary or abusive force, unlawful or arbitrary arrest and detention, and ill-treatment of protesters are investigated promptly and thoroughly. The findings of this investigation should be made public and those responsible, including those who committed, ordered, condoned or failed to prevent such violations, must be prosecuted in proceedings that meet international fair trial standards.

Amnesty International urges authorities to hold full consultations on the irrigation project with those likely to be affected and representatives of these affected communities. Such consultations are vital to safeguarding the rights of local communities. The Odisha government should ensure that individuals and activists engaged in peaceful protests against these plans and journalists documenting these protests should be able to do so without fear of violence or harassment.

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