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India: Drop false charges against those protesting against Vedanta's land acquisition in Orissa and release them

Amnesty International urges authorities in the eastern Indian state of Orissa to immediately release 47 villagers of Rengopalli who were arrested on 21 January for peacefully protesting the pollution of their ancestral land by Vedanta Aluminium's Lanjigarh bauxite refinery, and to drop the charges against them.

The villagers were trying to stop Vedanta from taking over one of the two access roads to their village. The road is the most direct route to the village, as well as to the Vedanta refinery's 60 hectare red mud pond, the second such repository for toxic waste from the refinery's operations.

The first red mud pond, which had leaked twice during the monsoon season last year, is already full with toxic wastes. Research by Amnesty International has showed that the refinery and its red mud pond, which have been in operation for four years, do not meet national or international standards in relation to its environmental, social and human rights impact.

Amnesty International urges the state authorities to comply with their obligations under Indian and international law by immediately consulting with the affected communities at Rengopalli about the potential impact of the red mud ponds.

Vedanta Aluminium is a fully-owned subsidiary of UK-based Vedanta Resources. Residents of Rengopalli, one of the 12 villages surrounding the refinery, have been campaigning against the take over of their access road claiming the second red mud pond will further pollute their lands and water. They have also alleged that the local authorities had failed to duly consult with elected village councils in the area as required by law before deciding to take over the 0.5 hectare land on which the access road was located.

The arrested, including 38 Adivasis (Indigenous people) and 9 Dalits, face several charges including rioting and attempting to murder police officials who aided the company's security guards and contractors. Bulldozers and other heavy equipment were used to take over the land; five Adivasi women sustained injuries in the police baton-charge during the protests.

The residents informed Amnesty International that, earlier, a local court, before which the company had filed a petition seeking police protection to take over the land under dispute, had sought further details on its status. But Rengopalli residents allege that the local authorities and the police swung into action, proclaimed prohibitory orders at the red mud pond site, charged 37 of the villagers with violating these orders and made them appear before the authorities on 20 January in an attempt to persuade them to renounce their resistance to the project.

Amnesty International believes that the local authorities, instead of protecting the rights of the Adivasis to their traditional lands and habitats as required by Indian and international law, acted in a manner which facilitated the takeover of their land for the company. Video footage of the confrontation shows local security forces cooperating closely with company officials and private security as they approached the peaceful protest.

After the Orissa high court last week dismissed the Vedanta Aluminium's plea for a six-fold expansion of the refinery, Amnesty International reiterated its demand that the Indian authorities order its immediate clean-up, including of the first red mud pond which is full.

ENDS/-

Notes to Editors

Please see below a link to a short film with footage taken by Orissa residents illustrating events:

<https://adam.amnesty.org/asset-bank/action/viewAsset?id=150508>

Public Document

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