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Orissa high court rejects Vedanta refinery expansion

Amnesty International has urged the Indian authorities to order the immediate clean-up of an alumina refinery in the state of Orissa, following a high court decision to reject plans for its expansion by a subsidiary of the UK-based Vedanta Resources.

The High Court of Orissa on Tuesday upheld the Indian government's decision made in August 2010, to reject Vedanta Aluminium's plans for the six-fold expansion of the Lanjigarh refinery, finding that the project violated the country's environmental laws.

Vedanta Aluminium challenged the Ministry of Environment and Forest's decision in the high court on November 2010.

"This decision is of tremendous significance for the local communities, who have been fighting to prevent this expansion going ahead," said Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Deputy Director, Madhu Malhotra.

"The refinery, which has been in operation for four years, fails to meet accepted national and international standards in relation to its environmental, social and human rights impact. The authorities must order an immediate clean-up of the site and monitor the health status of the local communities.

"The Ministry of Environment and Forests must also carry out an independent audit to ascertain whether the refinery's almost-full 28 hectare red mud pond, from which two breaches have been reported in April and May, is operating in compliance with India's environmental protection laws and international standards."

Residents of 12 villages who live in the shadow of the massive refinery – mostly Majhi Kondh Adivasi (Indigenous) and Dalit communities who rely on agriculture for their livelihoods – have long campaigned against the expansion, arguing it would further pollute their land and water.

The Ministry of Environment and Forests rejected the expansion plan on 24 August 2010. It also rejected plans, by Sterlite India, another Vedanta Resources' subsidiary and the state-owned Orissa Mining Corporation, to mine bauxite at Niyamgiri Hills near Lanjigarh after finding that it would violate forest and environmental laws and the rights of the Dongria Kondh adivasi communities.

Challenges against this by Sterlite India and the Orissa Mining Corporation are pending in India's National Green Tribunal and Supreme Court.