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India: Proposed Vedanta mine threatens livelihoods and cultural identity of indigenous community

The Indian government should immediately withdraw the clearance granted to a massive mining project that threatens the lives and livelihoods of a protected indigenous community living there, Amnesty International said today.

In April 2009, Indian authorities gave Vedanta Aluminium Limited and the state-owned Orissa Mining Corporation permission to mine bauxite for the next 25 years in the Niyamgiri Hills, in the eastern state of Orissa. The mine falls within the traditional lands of the Dongria Kondh community, an indigenous community with special protection under Indian law.

Members of the Dongria Kondh told an Amnesty International delegation in March 2009 that they fear the mine will destroy their sacred sites, decimate their forests, pollute their water source and cause an influx of traffic and people that would threaten their traditional way of life.

“For centuries the Dongria Kondh community have considered the Niyamgiri Hills sacred; central to their collective identity and religious beliefs. The hills are also essential to their economic and physical survival,” said Madhu Malhotra, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for Asia Pacific. “The 8,000 strong Dongria Kondh now face an uncertain future.”

The Dongria Kondh have special status under Indian law. Their communities and traditional lands, are protected under the Indian constitution, national laws, and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

“Contrary to international human rights standards, the Indian authorities have failed to obtain the free and informed consent of the Dongria Kondh prior to the approval of this project,” said Madhu Malhotra. “Now the very existence of the Dongria Kondh as a distinct Indigenous people hangs in the balance.”

Amnesty International is calling on India’s authorities to live up to their international human rights obligations by withdrawing the clearance granted for the mine project until measures are taken to ensure that it will not impact negatively on the human rights of the Dongria Kondh and other communities. In addition, the Indian authorities should set up a genuine consultation process with the communities who may be affected.

Notes to Editors:

- Vedanta Aluminium Limited is a subsidiary of the UK-based company

- The Dongria Kondh are an adivasi (Indigenous community) and were described as ‘endangered’ by India’s Supreme Court-appointed Central Empowered Committee (CEC). They live on and at the base of the Niyamgiri Hills
- In February and March 2003, the Indian authorities held public hearings on the proposed mine. However, the Dongria Kondh communities living in and around the hills were not told about them. No information was presented at public hearings on the potential risks and negative impacts of bauxite mining in the area.
- Amnesty International’s Demand Dignity campaign aims to end the human rights violations that drive and deepen global poverty. The campaign will mobilise people all over the world to demand that governments, big corporations and others who have power, listen to the voices of those living in poverty and recognise and protect their rights. For more information visit www.demanddignity.org