

NEWS WRAP AGD

EARLIER LAND acquisition work at the proposed rural site, for the mega Posco Steel Project near Paradip (Orissa) was abandoned in August 2010, following objections from the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests. The N C Saxena panel had pointed out gross violation of provisions, under the Forests Right Act (2006). Now barely three months after putting sixty conditions pertaining to pollution control and the captive port in the vicinity of the steel plant, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests has granted final forest clearance to Posco's Rs 54,000 crore, 12-million ton integrated steel plant. The Orissa State Government has resumed land acquisition activities since 18 May 2011. The steel plant is coming up on 1620 hectares of land, spread over eight villages in Jagatsinghpur district, of which 1253 hectares is forest land. There are 4000 tribal families, comprising more than 20,000 members, living in the area. Though required under the Forests Act, certificates from gram sabhas were not obtained, but certificates from the district magistrate were relied on, while sanctioning clearance. The massive project was broken up into smaller units for granting clearance. The proposed steel mill was separated on paper to three separate units, of four million tons each. The ecologically sensitive Jatadhar creek will have a captive port, which is described as "minor" but will actually be larger than the largest port in India. In an important nesting site for the endangered Olive Ridley turtles, the proposed port will have 12 km channels and massive sea walls.

In areas falling under Coastal Regulation Zones, steel plants are not permitted. But the Posco Plant will be constructed in an area raised by five metres, by dumping million of tons of sand dredged from the sea, as protection from severe cyclones. The dredging will make the surrounding areas more vulnerable. For a capacity of 12 million tons of steel per annum, Posco needs 600 million tons of iron ore. Valuable iron ore is being supplied virtually free, and the profit on iron ore alone, after meeting all costs, is expected at Rs 240,000 crore per annum.

MAHESHWAR DAM

The Maheshwar Dam is designed to deliver 400 mega watts of power, and supply drinking water to several towns in Central India. In Feb 2010, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests had blocked construction of the last five gates of the Maheshwar dam in Madhya Pradesh, because of poor progress on rehabilitation of about 9400 families, who would be affected by land submerged by the project. Till date, among nine villages that would be fully submerged, only one village has been relocated to a developed site. Now after intense pressure from the Central and State Government, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, has condoned breaches of environment laws, and lifted the stop work orders on the dam over Narmada river. Work has been resumed on the last five gates of the Maheshwar dam. Twenty-two of the planned twenty seven gates are already operational. There are fears that if the work was not completed speedily, the monsoons floods could damage the existing construction. Rehabilitation of the displaced may remain incomplete when the reservoir builds up water.

HAMAS-FATAH DEAL

The Palestinian accord, between Islamist Hamas movement and the Fatah party, is a landmark reconciliation deal, aimed at healing the bitter rift between the two groups. Promising to establish a new consensus government, the two parties aim to hold presidential and parliamentary elections, within the next year. The pledge will place unified rule over the Hamas controlled Gaza Strip and the West Bank which is administered by the Fatah dominated Palestinian authority. Fatah and Hamas are yet to tackle contentious issues, like integrating the security forces and the composition of the new government. Israel has called on western donors to stop the flow of money to the Palestinian Authority, and has halted the transfer of tax revenues it collects, on the Palestinians behalf. In the occupied West Bank, Israel continues settlement constructions, for Israeli Jews, while hailing the accord, the Palestinian president Mahmood Abbas has insisted that the unity deal would not stand in they way of peace talks with Israel. □□□