

Bishop in Orissa backs villagers against Korean steel giant

BHUBANESWAR, India – The Catholic Church in Orissa offered support to villagers fighting a Korean steel giant that they say threatens to displace thousands of people with its planned \$12 billion development project in eastern India.

“We oppose anything that goes against the interests of the communities,” Bishop John Barwa of Rourkela told the Asian church news agency UCA News March 6. “The church cannot accept projects that would make people refugees in their own land.”

Villagers are fighting government plans to lease 4,000 acres of village land to the Pohang Iron and Steel Co. – known as POSCO – for three projects including iron mining, a steel processing plant and a private port.

Villagers have challenged the company’s subsidiary, POSCO-India, since 2005 when it signed development agreements with the state government. The project is the largest foreign investment in India’s history.

Opposition comes from affected villages in Keonjhar and Sundargarh districts and the coastal district of Jagatsingpur.

Mansid Ekka, a Christian who leads the villagers’ fight, called the project a conspiracy by the state to “loot vulnerable tribal and dalit people in the name of development.”

Dalit means “broken open” in Sanskrit and denotes people formerly known as untouchables in India’s multitiered caste system.

Father Nicholas Barla, a tribal leader and a human rights and environmental activist, said the proposed mines would displace 42,493 people – including 32,044 tribal, dalit and poor Christians – in Sundargarh alone.

Activists claimed the projects also would disturb region’s fragile environment and

pollute irreplaceable bodies of water. They said about 2,700 acres pledged for the project are covered by forests that the company plans to clear.

“Our lands, houses, rice fields, betel vines, cashew plants, forest lands, river, ponds, and seashore will be snatched away from us,” said Nrusingho Behera, a youth activist.

Betel leaves are valued as a mild stimulant and for their medicinal properties.

Praful Samantaray, who leads Jana Shakti Abhiyan, a community group involved in the campaign, said the planned port threatens the nesting habitat of the Olive Ridley turtle as well as dolphins, hyenas, jackals and other forest animals. The port would “destroy mangroves and increase the intensity of cyclones,” he said.

John Dayal, president of the All India Christian Council, said the Catholic Church must support “the movement against large projects which are denuding forests, marginalizing tribal people and trivializing human dignity.”

For its part, POSCO-India in early February announced a compensation package to landowners and the landless workers who harvest the betel leaves. The company earlier pledged to establish a foundation to support community programs.