

CAMPAIGN ALERT

Global Response

TAKE ACTION NOW!



Shujur Moni Maddi, a Santal woman, plays with her children in front of her mother's home. Her village and more than 100 others would be at high risk for forced displacement if the Phulbari coal mine is built. Photo by Narin Siraj Annie.

BANGLADESH

Ban Open-Pit Coal Mining, Defend Indigenous Rights

A British company is trying to sell a bill of goods to one of the world's poorest countries, Bangladesh. Global Coal Management Resources (GCM) wants to bulldoze 12,000 acres of Bangladesh's most productive agricultural land and replace it with one of the world's largest open-pit coal mines. By their own account, they would forcibly displace 40,000 people in the Phulbari region, including at least 2,200 Indigenous people whose history in the area dates back 5,000 years. A government-sponsored study estimates that 130,000 people in more than 100 villages would be immediately displaced, and another 100,000 would gradually be forced to leave as their wells and irrigation canals run dry from the mining. Independent researchers and the Jatiya Adivasi Parishad (National Indigenous Union) estimate that 50,000 Indigenous people belonging to 23 different tribal groups would be displaced or impoverished by the mine.

Tens of thousands of Bangladeshi citizens have protested against the Phulbari mine project since 2005. After government forces opened fire during a nonviolent protest in 2006, killing three people and wounding hundreds, a national strike closed down the country for four days. It ended when the government agreed to ban open-pit coal mining in Phulbari and kick the British company (then known as Asia Energy) out of the country—a pledge they have not fulfilled. Instead, the government will announce a new coal policy by June 2011, and Global Coal expects to be in business soon thereafter.

The National Indigenous Union and a broad coalition of human rights and environmental organizations are appealing for international support to prevent an ecological and humanitarian disaster in Phulbari. Please join our letter-writing campaign today!

Over a 30-year period, GCM proposes to extract 572 million tons of coal from a series of 1,000-foot-deep pits covering a total of 14,500 acres in Phulbari; build a power plant where some of the coal will be burned; build railroads and ports to export the rest; and divert and dredge rivers to accommodate the barges and ocean-going ships that will carry the coal downriver and out to sea through the Sundarbans protected mangrove forest reserve (a UNESCO World Heritage Site). The company promises to provide jobs, electricity, royalties at 6 percent, tax income, and at the end of the project a lovely lake.



Indigenous people joined thousands of Bangladeshi citizens in a 7-day march to Phulbari in October 2010, demanding a ban on open-pit coal mining. Photo by Rabindranath Soren.

At what cost?

Phulbari's agricultural land itself would be a loss to Bangladesh. High elevation protects Phulbari's rice and other staple crops from the floods that frequently wipe out crops at lower elevations. Phulbari's farmlands are important for food security in a country where nearly half the population lives below the "nutrition poverty line."

For thousands of families who would lose their homes and agricultural lands, the company cannot offer equivalent land: there is none. Cash payments to families displaced by development projects results in impoverishment, according to many studies of "development refugees."

Indigenous leaders fear that if their small communities are broken apart and dispersed, they will not be able to maintain the cultural traditions, religious practices, and languages that have sustained them for thousands of years. To them, the mine means ethnocide. Most Indigenous families own an acre of land—or less—and they augment their income by sharecropping, selling their labor, or making baskets and other crafts. Their cultural lives revolve around a calendar of religious ceremonies that are closely tied to the land, the harvests, the sacred groves and springs, and ancient burial grounds of their peoples. A Santal man in Boro Bukchi Village whose name is withheld for his protection summed up the feeling of his people: "If they make the mine, we will stay here. We won't go. We will give our lives here. We've been here forever."

The environmental impacts of GCM's Phulbari mine extend far beyond the project site. For 30 years, day and night, huge pumps will drain water from the 1000-foot-deep pits, sucking the water from the surrounding villages' wells and irrigation canals, too. Coal dust and emissions from the power plant will pollute the air, water, and soil with mercury, arsenic, lead, and other toxins. Acid mine drainage may continue to contaminate ground water for centuries.

River ecosystems will be disrupted by diversion and dredging to make way for the coal barges. These will ply through Bangladesh's protected mangrove forests, the Sundarbans, where fuel spills and accidents could destroy the mangrove barrier that is Bangladesh's only protection during cyclones. The Sundarbans World Heritage Site also provides critical habitat for many endangered species, including the Bengal tiger.

Finally, should a British company push Bangladesh—a country that is so vulnerable to rising sea levels—to produce more greenhouse gas emissions? James Hansen, director of NASA's Goddard Space Institute, says that ending emissions from coal is "80 percent of the solution to the global warming crisis."

The Bangladesh government will make its fateful decision on GCM's project by June. To prevent an environmental and humanitarian disaster, please send letters, faxes, or emails to the prime minister today.

You Can Help

Write a Letter for this Campaign

Bangladesh's National Indigenous Union (Jatiya Adivasi Parishad) asks us to support its call for a ban on open-pit coal mining in Phulbari. Please send polite letters to Bangladesh authorities.

Express your support for thousands of Bangladesh citizens who are calling for a ban on open-pit mining in Phulbari.

Urge the officials to reject Global Coal Management Resources' Phulbari project because it would:

- destroy agricultural lands that are important for food security
- violate the human rights of thousands of displaced families
- threaten the survival of 5,000-year-old Indigenous cultures
- pollute the air, soil, and water for centuries to come
- destroy river ecosystems
- threaten the Sundarbans mangrove forests that protect Bangladesh from cyclones and provide critical habitat to many endangered species
- produce greenhouse gases that cause climate change, further endangering Bangladesh's lowland populations

Urge them to endorse and implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Please send your letter to:

Sheikh Hasina, Honourable Prime Minister
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
Prime Minister's Office
Old Sangsad Bhaban
Tejgaon, Dhaka-1215, Bangladesh
E-mail: info@pmo.gov.bd; pm@pmo.gov.bd;
ps1topm@pmo.gov.bd; psecy@pmo.gov.bd
Fax: +880 2 811 3244 / 3243 / 1015 / 1490

Send a copy of your letter to:

Advocate Mostafizur Rahman, M.P.
Honourable State Minister
Ministry of Land
Room # 305, 3rd Floor, Building # 4
Bangladesh Secretariat, Dhaka, Bangladesh
E-mail: state_minister@minland.gov.bd

Michael Anderson, Director General
Policy and Global Issues
Department for International Development
1 Palace Street
London SW1E 5HE United Kingdom
Fax: + 020 7023 0019
Email: c/o_LizWhitby, l-whitby@dfid.gov.uk

Tips:

US postage to Bangladesh is 98 cents.
A model letter is available at www.cs.org
Personal, mailed letters have highest impact!
For more information, please see:

<http://www.accountabilityproject.org>
<http://www.protectbdrresources.org.uk/>
http://www.banktrack.org/show/dodgydeals/phulbari_coal_mine

Thank you for joining in this campaign!

Cultural Survival

www.culturalsurvival.org

YOUTH ACTION

Global Response

WRITE A LETTER TODAY!



BANGLADESH

Don't Destroy Indigenous People's Homes and Farms!

If the Phulbari coal mine is built, this Santal Indigenous woman will lose her house and her farmland. Photo by Nasrin Siraj Annie.

Cultural Survival encourages children and teens to learn about Indigenous peoples, especially how Indigenous communities organize to defend their rights and protect their lands. Sometimes, when governments and companies are not respecting their rights, Indigenous Peoples ask us to help them by writing letters.

Right now, a British company wants to make one of the world's largest coal mines in the Asian country of Bangladesh. If they get the government's permission, they will bulldoze 12,000 acres of farmland to dig out the coal. The company will force 130,000 people to move off their land, and they won't give them new lands to farm. Indigenous people have lived on this land for 5,000 years. Their sacred groves and springs and burial grounds are there, and they don't want to leave. They are asking us to help them convince the government to say "no" to the coal mine and "yes" to human rights. Will you write a letter to the prime minister of Bangladesh today?

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YOUTH ACTION

Don't Destroy Indigenous People's Homes and Farms!

Please write a polite letter to the prime minister of Bangladesh. Tell her what you think about the idea of building an open-pit coal mine in Phulbari. Ask her to respect the human rights of the Indigenous Peoples who live there.

SEND YOUR LETTER TO:

Sheikh Hasina, Honorable Prime Minister
Government of the People's Republic of
Bangladesh
Prime Minister's Office
Old Sangsad Bhaban
Tejgaon, Dhaka-1215
Bangladesh

LETTER WRITING TIPS:

Start your letter with this salutation:
Honorable Prime Minister,

Make sure your letter is polite and respectful.

At the end of your letter, ask the prime minister for a reply.

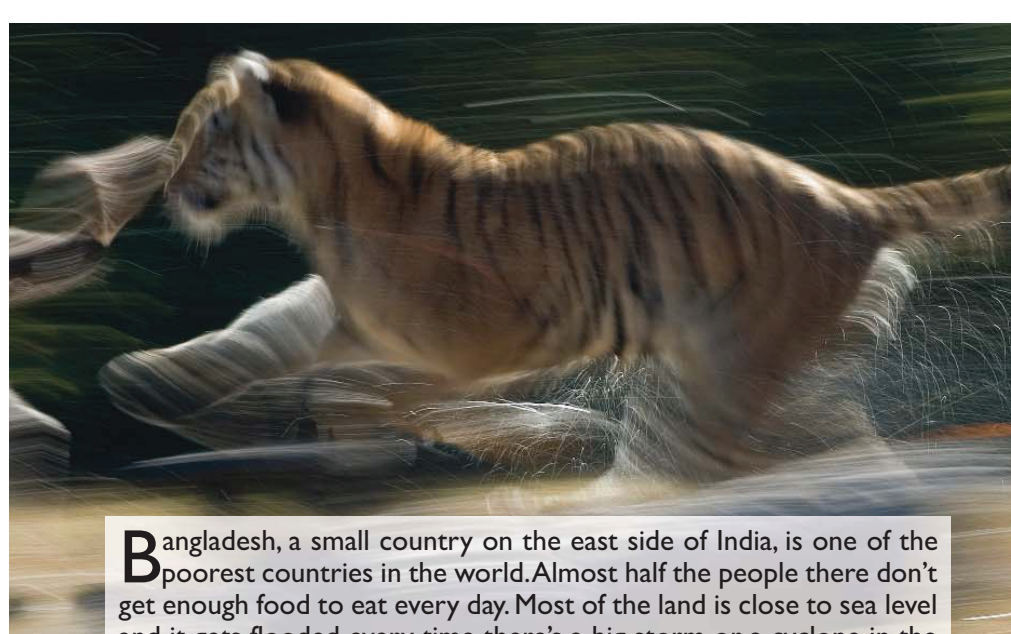
Include your name, your age, and your address on your letter. You might get a letter back from the prime minister of Bangladesh!

Postage from the US is 98 cents.

In the Santal language, "Johar!" (Thank you!)

Top: The Sundarbans mangrove forest is one of the last places where endangered Bengal tigers live freely. Photo by Tancread on Flickr creative commons
Left: Polish coal plant. Photo by ecotist on Flickr creative commons

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Bangladesh, a small country on the east side of India, is one of the poorest countries in the world. Almost half the people there don't get enough food to eat every day. Most of the land is close to sea level and it gets flooded every time there's a big storm or a cyclone in the Bay of Bengal. Rice and other food crops grow best on higher land, like the farms in Phulbari in northwest Bangladesh. Indigenous peoples like the Santal and Munda have grown food in Phulbari for 5,000 years.

Now a British company called Global Coal Management Resources wants to destroy 12,000 acres of farmland and make all the people move off the land so they can make a coal mine there. They will pay the people, but they won't give them land where they can farm because there is no land available. A Santal mother whose village would be destroyed by the mine explained, "Everywhere here is open space. The kids like to run around. We women work together in the fields and in the village. We have ducks and hens we can sell. We are happy here. If they make us move, how will we live? No, no. We don't want the mine."

If the company gets permission from the Bangladesh government, they will move 130,000 people off the land. Then they will dig huge open pits 1,000 feet deep to take out the coal. The air and water for miles around will become polluted with toxic dust. More dangerous pollution will be caused by burning the coal to produce electricity.

The rest of the coal will be shipped to other countries, and that is another problem. The coal barges will travel constantly up and down the rivers and through a very important forest: the Sundarbans mangrove forest. This is a very fragile habitat for endangered species like the Bengal tiger. With so many coal barges moving through the mangroves day and night, the danger of accidents and oil spills is very high.

Will you help the Santal, Munda, and other Indigenous people convince their government to say "no" to the Phulbari coal mine?



Find Out More: How Cool is Coal?

What do you know about coal? Throughout the world, most of our electricity comes from burning coal. But in the United States we have not built any new power plants that burn coal in the last two years. Why? Because burning coal pollutes the air and water with toxic chemicals that can cause illness. It also releases gases into the atmosphere that cause acid rain and global warming. In fact, burning coal is the number one cause of climate change. That means that *not* burning coal is the number one thing we can do to prevent climate change! Who said that? Dr. James Hansen, director of NASA's Goddard Space Institute!

Find out more: Where does electricity in your town come from? What is your community doing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions?