



VEDANTA CARES?

**Busting the myths about Vedanta's
operation in Lanjigarh, India**

act:onaid

Background

For generations, indigenous people from the Dongria Kondh, Kutia Kondha and Jharania Kondha tribal groups have lived in the lush forests of Niyamgiri mountain, in Kalahandi District, Orissa, India, by foraging in the forests, raising chickens and growing vegetables and rice.

Now, local tribal families are living in fear for their future due to the arrival of a combined bauxite mining and alumina refinery project in the heart of their ancestral domain by an Indian subsidiary of the UK mining and metals company, Vedanta Resources plc.

Over the past three years, villagers claim to have been involuntarily displaced from their homes and refused compensation for their lost land. Their protests about the threat the project poses to the forests they depend upon for their livelihoods have been repeatedly ignored by officials and the company. They also have deep concerns about the impact of mining on Niyamgiri mountain, from which they derive many of the religious beliefs and cultural practices that define their tribal identity.

The problems began following the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the Government of Orissa and Sterlite Industries (India) Ltd, a subsidiary of Vedanta Resources plc, for establishing a bauxite mine on the plateau atop Niyamgiri, as well as an associated alumina refinery plant at the foot of the mountain, near the town of Lanjigarh. This was followed by an official agreement signed on the 5th of October 2004 between the Orissa Mining Corporation (OMC) and Sterlite Industries for the purpose of mining of bauxite reserves at Lanjigarh.

The company plans to mine over 1 million tonnes of bauxite a year from reserves within Niyamgiri mountain. Official studies have suggested that this is likely to lead to massive deforestation on the slopes, the destruction of protected local ecosystems rich in biodiversity, and the disruption of key water sources that supply springs and streams on the surrounding



hillsides and feed two rivers which irrigate large areas of farmland in southeast Orissa¹.

In addition to the proposed mine, Vedanta has already constructed a huge alumina refinery plant near the town of Lanjigarh, and is now digging 'ponds' to hold the toxic waste that the factory will produce. This plant and associated perimeter wall and feeder road has been the source of major conflict with local villagers, who claim that homes and farms have been bulldozed without due consultation or compensation.

In response to these developments, villagers from the surrounding area have been organising in ever-greater numbers to protest against the company and are gaining support locally, nationally and internationally. At meetings from village to district level, local people have been condemning the Vedanta development and planning how to respond.

On May 16, 2006, a huge meeting was held in Lanjigarh where 10,000 mostly indigenous people from the affected districts of Rayagada and Kalahandi unanimously opposed the construction of the refinery. The women's network is particularly strong.

¹ These include a 2006 report by the Government-run Wildlife Institute of India entitled "Studies on Impact on Forests of Proposed Lanjigarh Bauxite Mining on Biodiversity including Wildlife and its Habitat", and a report released by the Supreme Court of India's Central Empowered Committee in September 2005.

On March 1, 2007 local women gathered under the banner of the Adim Adhikar Surakshya Manch in a clearing near Bijapur to voice their concerns. The meeting was witnessed by British journalist Stuart Freedman who writes:

“Frail looking tribal women take the microphone in turn and address the overwhelmingly female audience of perhaps several thousand squatting cross-legged under the midday sun. Some have walked 25 kms just to be here. The women’s shrill, weak voices cause the microphone to squeal and pitch but the messages are clear...”

The company is aware that the project has sparked protests, but has not appeared overly concerned by them. “As with all large developments, there are controversies, but the company has experienced a limited amount of protests...”²

But resistance to the project continues to intensify. The movement against Vedanta in Lanjigarh has growing support from residents of nearby urban areas and has enlisted the support of local, national and international lawyers and activists. Community representatives and campaigners supporting their case come together as Sachetan Nagarik Manch (SNM), chaired by local lawyer Sidharth Nayak. SNM and other local activists have confronted Vedanta and are demanding that they cease their activities in Niyamgiri.

Petitioners have also appealed to the Supreme Court of India, the Orissa state Parliament and the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF).

There are currently three separate complaints against Vedanta being heard by the Supreme Court. All the petitions allege environmental violations on a range of counts. Key amongst these allegations is the illegal diversion of forestland and construction of road in a wildlife sanctuary for bauxite mining and questions over the initial ‘permission’ for setting up the refinery. A ruling from the Supreme Court is expected on 9 August, 2007.

Frail looking tribal women take the microphone in turn and address the overwhelmingly female audience of perhaps several thousand squatting cross-legged under the midday sun. Some have walked 25 kms just to be here.

² Vedanta spokesperson quoted in the *The Guardian* 03/08/06.

Despite these legal challenges and the mobilisation of local indigenous people against the project, the company appears determined to press ahead with its plans. This report presents the biggest myths about Vedanta in relation to this project and unravels the truth behind each with evidence from official reports, journalists, ActionAid’s own field visits and first hand accounts of local people.

Myth 1

Vedanta has the indigenous community’s best interests at heart

“We aim to carry out our activities in a socially responsible manner and create value for the communities where we operate. Sustainable development principles are fundamental to our approach. These principles require us to monitor and reduce social risks and create partnerships with our local communities.”

(Vedanta Annual Report 2006)

Reality:

- Vedanta’s mining operation will destroy all that is sacred to the indigenous communities of Niyamgiri (such as the mountain, forest and ‘Mother Earth’).



- Construction of the refinery is already causing great distress.

Way of life under threat

Niyamgiri Hill in Lanjigarh, Orissa is home to several 'Primitive Tribal Groups' that have special status in the Indian Constitution as among the most vulnerable indigenous communities with distinct culture and customs. The Dongria Kondhs, Kutia Kondhs, Majhi Kondhs and Jharania Kondhas live here in about 200 villages near the forest and the streams. The mountain is a living God for them. This is the same mountain where Vedanta plans to mine bauxite.

Local people say they will not be able to withstand the loss of their sacred land and traditional way of life.

"We live because of Niyamgiri. If it goes we will be finished," says Alisi Majhi of Sindhbahal Village, part of the Kutia Kondh community.³

"Our lives are with Niyamgiri. Our lifestyle is because of Niyamgiri... We eat tubers, leafy vegetables, millet and live. We know how to prepare forest products which we sell for income," she adds.⁴

Rajendra Vadaka of Kajuri village, part the distinctive Dongria Kondh community says: "Yes Niyamgiri is our God. We live in these mountains and survive. We don't have any land on which we can produce and live. We are dependent on the mountains. We won't leave Niyamgiri. We are mountain people if we go somewhere else we will die."⁵ Residents say that a mine blast on the mountain would be like an attack on their deity.

"We want to stay here and to keep worshipping our Mother Earth," says Anami Dei, from Kansari village.⁶

Central Empowered Committee (CEC), a body set up by the Supreme Court of India to monitor and ensure compliance with forest conservation orders, investigated three separate petitions that have been

We want to stay here and to keep worshipping our Mother Earth," says Anami Dei, from Kansari village.

³From interview by Indian filmmaker S.Josson, July 2007 .

⁴From interview by Indian filmmaker S.Josson, July 2007.

⁵From interview by British journalist S.Freedman, March 2007.

⁶From interview by Indian filmmaker S.Josson, July 2007.

filed against Vedanta. Petitioners allege that the tribal populations of Niyamgiri have a deep spiritual, emotional and cultural attachment to their ancestral land.

Summarising the allegations, the CEC report says: "A highly endangered primitive tribe – the Dongria Kondhs – whose population is less than 6000 reside in the Niyamgiri hills. They are dependent on farming / agroforestry and have no other source of livelihood. Niyamgiri Hill is a sacred hill for the Dongari Kandha tribe. They do not cultivate on hilltop out of respect and the hill is worshiped..."⁷.

Vedanta has informed ActionAid that "there is no habitation in the proposed mining site of the project at Niyamgiri," however, petitioners say that the company's mining plans are a threat to the tribes and their way of life.

After weighing the available evidence, the CEC investigators conclude that:

"The alumina refinery project should have been allowed to be constructed only after carrying out an in depth study about the effect of the proposed mining from Niyamgiri Hills on water regime, flora and fauna, soil erosion and on the Dongria Kandha tribes residing at Niyamgiri Hills."⁸

Impact of the construction

The indigenous groups have a symbiotic relationship with the mountain. They practise low intensity farming and collect fruits and flowers from the forest that covers Niyamgiri.

Though the refinery plant is not yet in full operation, it is already threatening this way of life. Land has already been taken from the local communities to build the refinery, and black smoke trails from the chimney.

Sabita Majhi of Bandhaguda village says: "We have a lot of problems with the sound from the refinery. We are not able to sleep at night. The dust comes into our ears, eyes, hair. We cannot live here. We have lost our land."⁹.

⁷Central Empowered Committee, Report in IA No.1324 Regarding the Alumina Refinery Plant being set up by M/S Vedanta Alumina Limited at Lanjigarh in Kalahandi District, Orissa, 21 September 2005

⁸ ibid

⁹ From interview by Indian filmmaker S.Josson, July 2007

Sabita Majhi of Bandhaguda village says: “We have a lot of problems with the sound from the refinery. We are not able to sleep at night. The dust comes into our ears, eyes, hair. We cannot live here. We have lost our land.

Gobindha Marin of Bandhaguda village says “They took our farming land. They left some houses. They took the cremation ground, temple, well, pond. How will we survive? The coal and bauxite powder comes into our food and water.”¹⁰

Myth 2

Vedanta strives towards environmental conservation

“Our responsibility necessitates that we act towards the environment from where we draw our resources and raw materials. We strive to act in a manner that reduces any impacts to desired and acceptable levels. We progress by ‘contributing to the basics of life in harmony with nature’. Broad areas of focus include environment conservation.”

(Vedanta Annual Report 2006)

Reality:

Dabu Majhi from Kankasarpa village is a widow. She has the distinctive nose jewellery of the Dongaria



¹⁰ From interview by Indian filmmaker S.Josson, July 2007

Kondh people. She fears that, “If the factory starts operating we cannot stay here anymore; our streams and forests and crops will be destroyed and we are dependent on Niyamgiri for water.”¹¹

The Mountain of Niyamgiri is protected under Section 18 of the Indian Wildlife Act as an area of extraordinary natural beauty. The forest covering the mountain has been officially recognised for its rich wildlife population¹². Niyamgiri was proposed as a wildlife sanctuary by Ministry of Environment and Forests in 1998. In 2004, The Orissa government declared it an elephant reserve. Elephants, sambhars, leopards, tigers, barking deer, several varieties of birds and many endangered species are found there.

More than 75% of the hill is covered by thick forests. It has more than 300 species of plants and trees, including 50 kinds of medicinal plants. These forests are yet to be surveyed properly for their rare flora and fauna.

But already heavy earth moving equipment is pushing tons of soil above a ridge overlooking the refinery chimney that belches out a steady flow of black smoke across the surrounding hills.

In a statement to ActionAid, Vedanta said that “all procedures and clearances as required under the Indian Land Acquisition Act 1984 were followed for the purpose of acquisition of land for the refinery project,” and that it had received “all requisite permits and approvals under Indian environment laws... for the construction of the refinery”. This is contradicted by the CEC report, which states that environmental regulations were violated when construction work of the alumina refinery started before the scheme was granted environmental clearance.¹³

If the factory starts operating we cannot stay here anymore; our streams and forests and crops will be destroyed and we are dependent on Niyamgiri for water.”

¹¹ From interview by British journalist S.Freedman, March 2007

¹² Both the CEC report, op cit, and a report by the Wildlife Institute of India, ‘Studies on Impact of Proposed Lajhigarh Bauxite Mining on Biodiversity including Wildlife and its Habitat’, 2006, discuss the rich biodiversity of the mountain ecosystem in some detail

¹³ ibid

Environmental experts have warned that strip mining of bauxite at the top of Niyamgiri would have a devastating impact on the flora, fauna, river systems and food production capacity of the mountain environment.

A study of the proposed project by the government-run Wildlife Institute of India (WII) concluded that mining could trigger, “irreversible changes in the ecological characteristics of the area”.¹⁴

An MoEF fact finding team sent to Lanjigarh in December 2004 also warned that “... unregulated [tree] felling in these areas is likely to have severe environmental impact”.¹⁵

Impact on water systems

Specifically, the WII report warns of the damaging consequences that bauxite mining on Niyamgiri could have on its hydrology, and consequently on the water systems that sustain the lush vegetation as well as providing drinking, washing and irrigation water to communities living in and around the mountain and to those downstream. The report notes:

“It is believed that the bauxite layer which is formed through leaching also acts as a layer for imbibing water and releasing it slowly throughout the year. It is anticipated that the removal of this layer of bauxite will impact ground waters in the region, and consequently the quality of the forest habitat...”

“Mining on this mineralized plateau will impact these aquifers in their discharges. There will be a fear of reduction of surface and ground water discharges in Vansadhara and Nagaveli rivers. This will eventually make the habitat drier and reduce its potential for productivity and biodiversity.”¹⁶

Siddharth Nayak, a lawyer and activist from Bhawanipatna town says:

“The people of Bolangir District completely depend upon the (Tel) River. And the villages on both sides of the bank do farming. The water which would be used by Vedanta for its refinery project from the river would be 4 crore litres per day as per Vedanta’s statistics. This will dry up the river.”

Every year during monsoon time we have some sudden floods with these ponds so close to the river how can pollution be avoided? If the trees on the mountain are cut then the floods can only get worse.

Santosh of Chatrapur village, Kalahandi district, through which one of the major rivers flows, says “The source of Bansadhara River is from Niyamgiri.” He fears that, “If we mine bauxite from there all the streams will dry up. Everybody will have problems with water.”

Bhima from the nearby Belamba village adds: “We will not get water even if we dig deep. It is only because of Niyamgiri that this whole area gets water. The Tel and Mahanadi Rivers will dry up. From where will we get water?”

With regard to the ‘red mud’ and ‘ash’ ponds being built for toxic waste from the refinery, Phulme Majhi, 25, a former Sarpanch (elected leader) from Jaganathpur panchayat (governing body) says: “Every year during monsoon time we have some sudden floods with these ponds so close to the river how can pollution be avoided? If the trees on the mountain are cut then the floods can only get worse.”¹⁷

Similar concerns were expressed in the CEC report with petitioners alleging that:

- Vamsdhara and Nagvalli are two major rivers that spring from Niyamgiri Hill. Hundreds of thousands of people of southern Orissa and Andhra Pradesh depend on these rivers for drinking water and irrigation. Bauxite mining may destroy the water recharging capacity of the hill and also dry up perennial streams. (The streams are used daily by locals for cultivation, fishing and household needs).
- The refinery plant is sourcing its water from Tel River. This river is used by thousands of people of Bolangir district downstream for irrigation and drinking. The CEC report found that the environmental impact of using Tel River has not been assessed.
- Red mud pond and ash pond, spaces for toxic wastes, are being built on Vamsdhara

¹⁴ ‘Wildlife Institute of India, op cit’

¹⁵ Quoted in CEC report, op cit

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ From interview by ActionAid staff, July 2007.

river banks. A flash flood can spill the red mud into the river. Red mud is a mix of highly toxic alkaline chemicals, heavy metals and radioactive elements. The dangerous heavy metals and chemicals could also leach into ground water and destroy all plant life. The CEC found that this has been ignored by the Environment Ministry (when it gave clearance in September 2004).

The CEC investigators conclude that the use of forest land in an ecologically sensitive area like the Niyamgiri Hill should not be permitted and that it is inappropriate to clear projects of such magnitude based on a study of only 60 days.¹⁸

ActionAid asked Vedanta to respond to allegations that the refinery and the associated mining project are having a detrimental impact on local environmental quality, including air pollution, noise pollution and contamination of local water supplies.

In responding Vedanta does not address these concerns specifically but says that that the refinery project has been designed in consultation with a reputed Australian firm and that the equipment chosen is eco-friendly and “the best of their kind in terms of compliance with environmental regulations”. They add that technology being employed is “state of the art” and that “the operating practices at the Lanjigarh project are in compliance with approved environmental standards.”

Myth 3

Locals are happily resettled

Vedanta has informed ActionAid that “103 families were displaced by the Lanjigarh project” and that “all these families are happily residing in the resettlement colony”.

The company states, “The relief and rehabilitation package is the best package offered by any company so far. In addition to financial compensation, we have also constructed a rehabilitation colony for all the displaced families... This has tremendously improved their standard of living compared with the facilities available earlier. All infrastructure facilities like roads, drainage systems, drinking water, electrification, a community centre building for school, health centre etc. have also been provided in the colony.”

¹⁸CEC report, op cit



Vedanta statement to ActionAid, 30 July 2007

Reality:

- Locals have allegedly been threatened and forcibly removed from their homes and land.
- People were moved to a Vedanta ‘village’ under constant surveillance. This is now largely abandoned, unsuited to local needs.

Threats and evictions

In March 2005 villages of Borbhata and Kinari were displaced to make way for the refinery construction. As the refinery area expands with feeder roads, air strip and toxic waste ponds, families in other villages including Bandhuguda are being asked to vacate their homes and land.

In visits to the area before and after the eviction of Borbhata and Kinari, ActionAid field workers heard numerous reports from villagers that people working in the company’s interest approached the larger land owners with offers of cash to vacate. Those who refused were threatened while those with little or no land were offered nothing, they say.

Dhepudi Majhi’s account is typical:

“Before the destruction of Kinari village, those individuals with more land were approached by outsiders and asked to take money to leave without any trouble and to motivate others to do the same. Most people didn’t comply. One of them was Dina Majhi. Finally he was threatened and told to accept the compensation. He took the money and left the village.”

Before the destruction of Kinari village, those individuals with more land were approached by outsiders and asked to take money to leave without any trouble and to motivate others to do the same.

“It has destroyed him. He has lost his land and now has no work. He is depressed and his family life is destroyed.”

“Others refused to leave or did not accept the money. The bulldozers came and began destroying their homes,” adds Kumuti.

On the night of the eviction he says, his village was alerted by people with relatives in Kinari and came to see what was happening:

“On one side there were bulldozers, on the other side trucks. It happened in the evening time. They had been cooking. The trucks started loading their belongings and the bulldozers started breaking their houses. Those people were all crying they didn’t want to go but they had no choice. By force they were put in the trucks with their belongings. The police were also there but they did nothing. Those putting people in trucks were the same people who were coming before to ask them to leave.”

“For one month those people were crying constantly in that rehabilitation camp. The children were crying even more. They kept asking when are we going back to our home.” We all felt so bad.”

Petitioners to the Supreme Court of India concur that:

“The displacement was opposed vehemently by them (mainly Kondh tribal people living on the plant site)... despite being offered large cash compensation by M/s Vedanta.”

They allege that:

“In the face of resistance, the district collector and the company officials collaborated to coerce and threaten them. Many of the tribals were badly beaten up by the police and the ‘goons’. An atmosphere of fear was created through the hired goons, the police and the administration.” (There is no hard evidence of company knowledge/involvement in such intimidation)

On one side there were bulldozers, on the other side trucks. It happened in the evening time. They had been cooking. The trucks started loading their belongings and the bulldozers started breaking their houses. Those people were all crying they didn’t want to go but they had no choice.

For one month those people were crying constantly in that rehabilitation camp. The children were crying even more. They kept asking when are we going back to our home.” We all felt so bad.

“After being forcibly removed they were kept under watch and ward by the armed guards of M/s Vedanta and no outsider was allowed to meet them. They were effectively being kept as prisoners,” they add.¹⁹

When ActionAid asked Vedanta to respond to allegations of using force and intimidation, the company said: “Contrary to these allegations which we know to be baseless, there has not been a single case of forcible evacuation of any people amid any physical threats supported by the fact that no complaint has been filed with the local authorities alleging any such instance. We are a value driven company and to engage in any form of force or intimidation is completely against our philosophy of conducting business.”

Despite the company’s assertions, numerous testimonies from local residents to ActionAid staff indicate that serious concerns remain. This view was also expressed by the Supreme Court’s Central Empowered Committee report which concluded that:

“The allegations about the improper rehabilitation and the forceful eviction need to be looked into carefully through an impartial and unbiased agency.”²⁰

Journalist and NGO visitors, including ActionAid staff, have been followed by young men on motorbikes when travelling between villages in the area. Drivers are stopped and passengers asked where they are going and why.

Community leaders say their movements are also closely monitored. They refer to the men on motorbikes as ‘company people’ because they appear to be acting in Vedanta’s interest although there is no evidence that these men are acting on the instructions or with the approval or knowledge of Vedanta.

¹⁹ CEC report, op cit

²⁰ CEC report, op cit

Phulme Majhi from Rajendrapur village says, “When I was applying for a passport the company people stopped me. They asked why are you going to Bhubaneswar (the state capital), what business have you got there. Luckily there were young people also travelling who were applying for college. I told the men that I was accompanying the students and they let me go.”

The Vedanta ‘village’

The relocation site is a compound of concrete two room houses surrounded by a barbed wire fence where displaced indigenous communities were moved after their land was acquired for the initial building work at the plant.

Before the Central Empowered Committee team visited in June 2005, no one was allowed to enter the rehabilitation colony and talk to the community members. After the CEC visit, guards from the colony were removed and replaced by an ‘in-charge’. Most homes have since been abandoned.

ActionAid field workers who visit villages in the area regularly as part of their work with indigenous communities across India’s indigenous belt reported:²¹

- Indigenous people are instructed not to light any fire inside the houses. Women are forced to cook open, under the scorching heat. Some have erected shades adjacent to their house.
- A series of latrines are in one corner of the colony but that is locked.
- None of the residents were given any papers proving ownership.
- The whole colony is fenced and guarded. Residents are not allowed to go to the forests on Niyamagiri.
- Outsiders are not allowed to meet/talk to any one in the colony alone. Visitors need to have written permission from Vedanta.
- Residents say they prefer not to talk for fear of recriminations.

When ActionAid visited with a journalist from the Sunday Times in May 2006, less than half of the houses were inhabited.

British journalist S.Freedman who visited the colony in March 2007 reported: “It is clear that the occupants

²¹ From field visits including, July 2005, May 2006 and June 2007

have simply left, unable to cope with their loss of land and traditional way of life.”

In discussions with ActionAid, families who have left the colony said they have returned to their partially demolished village and are using the house at the colony for storage.

Reasons for leaving the colony include that the concrete structures become too hot when the temperature rises and too cold when it falls; and that there is no shaded outside space around the homes for domestic activities and for children to play. They contrast this with their traditional homes of mud and sticks which are purpose built to meet their needs and the environment.

Myth 4

Vedanta is promoting sustainable development

“Our main focus has been and will continue to be to improve the quality of life and sustainability in the communities in which we operate”

Statement from Vedanta, 30 July 2007.

“...we remain committed to raising the quality of life and social well being of all the communities in which we operate.”

Vedanta 2006 annual report

Reality:

Livelihoods that have sustained local communities for generations are now under threat.

Damba Majhi, a widow from Belamba, one of the closest villages to the factory, says things were better before the company came:

“I grow makka (maize), beeri (black lentils), mandia (ragi) and paddy (rice). I plough the land nearby – I used to have more but the company took some of the land away (village common land that now falls within

Our main focus has been and will continue to be to improve the quality of life and sustainability in the communities in which we operate



the refinery perimeter); that land was much more fertile. We had really good paddy there...”²²

Locals report that a number of villages that used to grow and consume good quality vegetables and sell the rest in the market are now no longer able to cultivate vegetables as construction activities around the refinery site have taken over common areas of land that were blocked the flow of streams that once fed their fields. The price of vegetables in the market has also risen.²³

Linga Majhi from Rengopali village says, “Fresh vegetables have become a dream for us.”²⁴

Budhina Majhi of Cheanlima, says “I can not feed vegetables to my children from market paying Rs 30/- a kilo.”²⁵

Villagers of Bandhaguda village have lost access to their village forest which now falls inside the perimeter

²² From interview by British journalist S.Freedman, March 2007

²³ Villages include Bandhaguda, Basantpada, Kapaguda, Rangopali, Kendubordi, Balabhadrapur

²⁴ From interview by Indian filmmaker S.Josson, July 2007

²⁵ From interview by Indian filmmaker S.Josson, July 2007

of the refinery wall and was previously a source of food, fuel and fodder for domestic animals.

In the company’s 2005 and 2006 annual reports Vedanta mentions new employment opportunities for local people with the company but Sidharth Nayak, a lawyer and member of Sachetan Nagarik Manch, says that the promise of jobs is a cruel joke.

“On 19.3.2006, 85 graduates had appeared for interviews with Vedanta. The task given to the nine selected (which included four non-residents) is nothing to do with factory work. Instead they are employed as ‘motivators’ to try to convince the community to leave their villages and land,” he says.

“Families who lost their land were not given any job despite some of them being graduates or holding Industrial Training Institute certificates,” he adds.

This is contradicted by Vedanta, which states that it is “offering jobs to at least one member per displaced family”. It has informed ActionAid that 67 people from the 103 displaced families “have already voluntarily opted for employment. Their skills are currently being upgraded to meet the industry requirements and they are being inducted into the regular rolls of the company, after successful completion of their training”.

Vedanta states that it provided “compensation that was 25-50% more than the [minimum required] rate per acre... to every family that was displaced for the acquisition of their land, and the same has been disbursed fully”.



Linga Majhi from Rengopali village says, “Fresh vegetables have become a dream for us.”



Lingaraja Majhi, a 40-year-old man from Bandhaguda village which is on the list of areas to be displaced, says he accepted cash compensation to vacate his home and land after being persuaded by company ‘touts’ – young men apparently employed by the company – who told him that if he didn’t accept compensation now he would end up losing his home and getting nothing. He is already regretting it:

“We cannot eat money, and we know it won’t last long. We have lost our land and livelihood without any choice.”²⁶

A fact finding team of officials from the Ministry of Environment and Forests sent to Lanjigarh between the 18th and 23rd of December 2004 also reflected these concerns. According to the team, “the rehabilitation package for displaced persons... is not in the interest of sustainable livelihood of the local communities...”²⁷

²⁶ From interview by ActionAid staff during field visit, July 2007

²⁷ Quoted in CEC report, op cit

CALL TO ACTION

Campaigning groups* are calling for:

1. Vedanta must halt all mining and refining activities in Lanjigarh and the Niyamgiri mountain area. This should include a halt to further construction work and deforestation and any transportation of bauxite.
2. The Government of India and the Government of Orissa must recognise that the project represents a fundamental violation of Indian environmental and human rights laws and recommend in the forthcoming Supreme Court hearing that all further activities in the area by the company are blocked.
3. The Indian government must ensure that all mining related activity, current and proposed, which involves displacement of indigenous communities, is brought in line with the International Labour Organisation convention 169 which protects identity and land rights of indigenous people. The Government of India must also ratify this convention.
4. The government of India must effectively enforce the Recognition of Forest Rights Act of 2006. This Act recognises that the rights of ‘scheduled tribes and other traditional forest dwellers’ over their habitat should be implemented.
5. In order to protect communities everywhere facing abuses by corporations, global minimum human rights standards for companies must be developed within the United Nations, backed by international complaints mechanisms for communities to seek justice at the United Nations Human Rights Council.

*The campaigning groups include Adim Adhikar Surakshya Manch (membership based forum for protection of rights of ‘Primitive Tribal Groups’), Sachetan Nagarik Manch Kalahandi (forum of conscious citizens), Niyamgiri Surakshya Samiti (Niyamgiri protection committee) and ActionAid.



act:onaid

ActionAid International

www.actionaid.org