PRESS RELEASE

Gross violation of human rights in Kalinganagar

New Delhi, 14 April 2010 – The Working Group on Human Rights in India and the UN (WGHR), a national coalition of human rights organisations and independent experts, condemns the severe repression of *adivasi* protestors in Kalinganagar, Orissa. Since 2006, the adivasis of Kalinganagar have been opposing the acquisition of their agricultural land for the construction of a mega TATA steel plant. At the heart of it, the communities are protesting the state government's insistence on displacing them from their fertile agricultural lands, when barren land is available. Refusing to address the communities' demands, the state government has been trying since 2006 to take their lands by force. Any and all democratic protest has been met with sheer force and total repression at every turn. In January 2006, 14 adivasi protestors were killed in police firing. To date, there has been no inquiry into the 2006 police firing.

"*The police killed 14 adivasis, their bodies were mutilated, and yet the State remains silent. What kind of Rule of Law is this?*", says Babu Mathew, WGHR member and human rights activist.

In the latest attack, on 30th March 2010, 29 platoons of armed police surrounded and fired upon protestors. An independent fact-finding team, headed by a retired judge of the Orissa High Court, reported that between 30-40 protestors were injured by indiscriminate police firing on 30th March 2010, in the three tribal villages they visited in Kalinganagar. Anyone injured was threatened with torture and arrest and prevented from leaving the village for medical treatment. The homes, food stocks, supplies, motorbikes and cycles of the villagers were damaged, and their livestock stolen. Eyewitnesses told the fact-finding team that private militias were also involved in the attacks.

For Miloon Kothari, Convenor of WGHR and former UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing: "*Kalinganagar is yet another tragic example of the State in league with private interests (militias and business houses) trampling on the rights of tribals, who are resisting unjust development projects and acquisition of their lands. The message from the State is clear: nothing must stand in the way of large development projects even if they violate numerous provisions in the Indian Constitution, national laws (2006 Forest Rights Act) and international human rights instruments ratified by India. All actors in the country who seek to uphold human rights, must strongly protest the clear complicity of State authorities in the gross violations of human rights currently underway in Kalinganagar*."

Since the police firing, activists in Orissa report that two people have died due to lack of medical attention. The police and private militias who carried out the attack are preventing the injured from receiving medical treatment. The villages continue to be surrounded by private militias supported by the local police. Anyone who comes out of the villages is falsely implicated in a criminal case, arrested and put in jail. No journalist or political party member has been allowed to visit the affected communities.

The state government has not followed through on repeated demands by the protesting communities, and construction of a "common corridor" highway leading to the proposed site of the steel plant began in November 2009. The communities are again protesting the acquisition of their fertile agricultural lands, on which they have lived and subsisted for time immemorial, when the state government is fully aware that barren land is available in a nearby location. The Visthapit Virodhi Manch, which leads the Kalinganagar struggle, is demanding land for land. This demand been reiterated in several discussions with the administration, including with the Chief Minister.

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WGHR strongly condemns the police repression of democratic protest in Kalinganagar, and denounces the state government of Orissa for its brute violations of the peoples' rights to life, liberty, and assembly.

We call upon the state government to immediately cease the police repression, and begin honest dialogue on land acquisition with the adivasi communities of Kalinganagar along with TATA Steel. In addition, WGHR unequivocally demands: 1) an immediate halt to the building of the common corridor, 2) withdrawal of all false criminal cases against protestors, 3) the removal of private militias and police gherao from the affected villages, and 4) medical treatment to be made immediately available.

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The Working Group on Human Rights in India and the UN – a national coalition of fourteen human rights organisations and independent experts – works towards the realisation of all civil, cultural, economic, political and social human rights in India and towards holding the Indian government accountable to its national and international human rights obligations. For information on WGHR, please visit: www.wghr.org