

PEOPLE'S UNION FOR CIVIL LIBERTIES (PUCL) Odisha Unit

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Press Statement

Dt.7.3.19

Sub: Arrest of Shri Lingaraj Azad, Leader of Niyamgiri Surakhya Samiti

Shri Lingaraj Azad, a leader of the anti-mining movement in Niyamgiri, who is also the vice-president of the political party Samajwadi Jan Parishad, has been arrested by the Kalahandi police on 6th March, 2019. The arrest of Shri Azad is yet another repressive act of the Government of Odisha meant to silence the voices of resistance of the people of Niyamgiri against Bauxite mining.

In the early morning of 6th March, some policemen from Kesinga Thana reached the house of Shri Azad, who lives with his family in a village named Kandel, about 15 kms from the town. He was woken up by the police and told that the SDPO had asked him to come to the Thana. After reaching the thana, he was interrogated by the police for several hours about a case which was filed in 2017 in the adjacent Thana of Lanjigarh. Then he was arrested and handed over to Lanjigarh police. Later in the day, he was produced before the Magistrate in Bhawanipatna, the district headquarters of Kalahandi.

At the Court, Shri Azad was represented by a lawyer who moved his bail application. However, Shri Azad was neither granted bail nor was his bail application rejected. The Magistrate kept it for consideration to be heard on the 8th and Shri was sent to judicial custody.

According to the police records, there are two cases against Shri Azad. One is case number 28/dated 26.04.2017 under Sections 143, 147, 148, 149, 341, 120B of the Indian Penal Code. This case is in connection with a protest demonstration which the Adivasis of Niyamgiri had staged in front of Vedanta's Alumina Plant about two years ago. According to Azad's lawyer Shri Purna Chandra Pradhan, there is no police record to show that Shri Azad was absconding or was issued summons to report at the police station.

The other case is in connection with a protest demonstration held in February, 2019, by the local Adivasis against the setting up of a CRPF camp near Trilochanpur village. The Sections under which this case is filed are - 147, 148, 294, 506 and 149 of the IPC, and Section 27 of the Arms Act.

It needs to be noted that, local adivasis including Dongria Kondhs of Niyamgiri have been protesting against the Alumina Plant and Bauxite mining, for more than a decade under the banner of Niyamgiri Surakhya Samiti. Shri Azad has been part of the NSS from the very beginning, and has been jailed more than once for raising his voice against Vedanta.

The State government, however, has been keen to hand over the hills to Vedanta and adopted all means, including the use of force, to suppress the movement. Picking up people from market place, illegal detention, arrest of innocent people, slapping false cases and threatening to name

them as 'Maoists' all these have been regular phenomena by the government, in the area. The deployment of para-military forces and combing operations in the name of curbing Maoists has been a constant threat to the common people living in the region.

The latest development in this regard has been the setting up of a CRPF camp in Trilochanpur village, despite strong opposition from the local people. This camp has been put up right at the Gram Panchayat office premises hampering its regular functioning. Local people have organised several protest rallies opposing the camp at Trilochanpur. One of the cases against Lingaraj Azad, which invokes, among others, the Section-27 of the Arms Act, pertains to his participation in one such rally held in February 2019.

Earlier, in October last year, Lodo Sikaka, one of the leaders of the Niyamgiri Surakhya Samiti, was picked up from the market place by the local police and was tortured. He was threatened to be booked as a 'Maoist', if he continued to organise people against mining.

In December last year, British Kumar, a resident of the Karlapat area (adjacent to Niyamgiri hills and a part of the proposed areas of Bauxite mining for Vedanta) was picked up by the police. He was ordered to report on a daily basis at the local police station, which itself is located near a CRPF camp. British Kumar has been opposing the mining project, but there was no case against him. This illegal action of the police could be stopped only after the Odisha Human Rights Commission intervened.

PUCL strongly condemns the arrest of Shri Lingaraj Azad which is nothing but a ploy to suppress the democratic voice of the Adivasis of Niyamgiri and those who have been raising voices against bauxite mining. PUCL also demands that the Government of Odisha withdraw the CRPF camp at Trilochanpur, respecting genuine concerns of the local people and stop using the law and order machinery to further the interests of corporate houses at the cost of local people.

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