

## Apex court clears Posco, Vedanta projects; villagers protest

The Supreme Court Friday cleared the diversion of forest land in Orissa for South Korean major Posco's steel plant and a mining project by Britain's Vedanta Resources, angering villagers and tribals in the region.

The apex court gave its nod for the diversion of 3,097 acres of forest land for the \$12 billion Posco steel plant in Jagatsinghpur district, Priyabrata Satpathy, a Supreme Court lawyer, told IANS.

The court also allowed Vedanta Resources to mine bauxite in Niyamgiri Hill in Kalahandi district to build an alumina refinery, he said.

'We are hopeful that we can now expedite the whole work of land acquisition,' said Avinashg Tiwari, a Posco spokesperson.

But people opposing the projects said they are determined to continue their protests, despite the Supreme Court ruling.

'Our protest will continue as usual. We will not allow the company to enter into our area,' said Prasant Paikray, an anti-Posco agitation leader.

Posco, the world's fourth largest steel maker, signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the state government in June 2005 to build the plant near Paradeep port by 2016.

But there has been little progress on the ground as activists have launched agitations and united villagers against the project.

Those opposed to the project say it will displace over 20,000 people from around 15 villages and ruin their betel-leaf farming. Supporters say the plant will bring prosperity and employment. Posco says the plant would affect only 500 families but would create thousands of jobs.

The court's decision brought cheer to Vedanta Resources as well.

'Now with today's judgment we hope to raise bauxite from Niyamgiri hill for our plant at Lanjigarh,' a Vedanta official said here.

The Kalahandi project will bring significant employment and economic growth, he said.

Vedanta Alumina, part of the Vedanta Resources (Sterlite) Group, is building an \$800 million alumina refinery in Kalahandi and an aluminium smelter project costing Rs.70 billion in Jharsuguda district.

The company wants to mine the Niyamgiri hill for bauxite to feed its plant. The hill in Lanjigarh block is inhabited by Dongaria Kondhs, a tribal group.

Tribals of Kalahandi as well as from Gajapati and Rayagada districts have been protesting after Vedanta signed an agreement with the state government to set up a refinery and mine bauxite four years ago.

The tribals claim that mining would pollute their rivers, destroy jungles and displace them from their land and culture.

'We are not going to vacate the land at any cost,' said Mali Puseka, a tribal leader.

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