

Meghalaya defers development work around uranium mining

Following a series of protests by environmentalist and political groups, the Meghalaya government has put on hold the infrastructure development work in the area where uranium is proposed to be mined.

The decision came after the government held separate meetings here Wednesday night with Khasi Students' Union (KSU) and the Coordination Committee of Social Organisations (CCSO), a forum of anti-mining groups.

After the meetings, Chief Minister D.D. Lapang said the government would not go ahead with the proposed pre-mining development project by the Uranium Corp of India Ltd (UCIL) at the mining sites of West Khasi Hills.

'We have decided to keep the project on hold for three months,' Lapang told reporters.

A Joint Committee on Uranium Mining of Meghalaya (JCUMM) headed by Mining and Geology Minister Bindo M. Lanong would look into various issues including the health and environment aspects of the project, the chief minister said.

'The committee will submit its report in three months.'

Representatives of various organisations like CCSO and KSU as well as independent groups and the media will be part of the committee.

KSU and several local parties have been spearheading the movement against the state government's decision to allow UCIL to carry out the Rs.209-crore development projects in 422 hectares of the uranium-rich areas of West Khasi Hills in southern Meghalaya.

KSU, a dominant student-youth body, has suspended the third phase of its night road blockade agitation (scheduled to start Oct 29) in protest against uranium mining after the government called the Wednesday's meeting.

KSU's road blockade agitation started Oct 14 and hit vehicular movement at night, specially buses and trucks on the national highways between Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura.

The blockade had turned violent with KSU members setting vehicles including government cars on fire.

The union ministry of environment and forests has given clearance to UCIL to start mining in the state, triggering strong protests from local parties and non-government organisations.

UCIL plans to produce 375,000 tonnes of uranium ore a year and process 1,500 tonnes of the mineral a day.

It has also proposed to set up a Rs.1,046-crore open-cast uranium mining and processing plant in Meghalaya, which has an estimated 9.22 million tonnes of uranium ore deposits.

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