

# Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT)

Press Release

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## Halt dams juggernaut on Teesta

*Affected Citizens of Teesta appeal to nation as Sikkim Satyagraha completes two years*

### **Teesta V: Violation of environmental norms, 48 people dead during construction**

**Gangtok:** On the occasion of the Union Power Minister, Mr. Sushil Kumar Shinde, dedicating the 510 MW Teesta V hydroelectric project to the nation, the Affected Citizens of Teesta have appealed to the nation to halt the indiscriminate juggernaut of dams in the ecologically and culturally sensitive Teesta river basin. ACT and other sister organisations have been on a Satyagraha since June 20, 2007 to raise concerns about the juggernaut of over two dozen dams planned in the tiny Himalayan state of Sikkim which are becoming a serious threat to the rights of the indigenous communities and the ecological security of the Himalayan state. This Satyagraha completed two years on June 19th this year.

In May 2008, Mr. Jairam Ramesh, who was then the Minister of State for Power, had raised concern about the 'MoU virus' which had affected some of the north-eastern states. He was referring to the rapid pace at which states such as Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh were signing agreements (MoUs) with hydropower companies. This 'MoU virus' has also created a serious environmental governance issue, which Mr. Ramesh in his present capacity as Environment Minister needs to deal with urgently.

As per current plans the Teesta and its tributaries, will see a maze of large hydel projects. The so called 'run-of-the-river' hydroelectric projects being developed involve the construction of large dams which divert the river waters through long tunnels, before the water is dropped back into the river at a downstream location after passing through a powerhouse. These projects are promoted as being 'environmentally benign' as they involve smaller submergences and lesser regulation of water as compared to conventional storage dams. This perception conveniently ignores the impact of several features intrinsic to this design. For example, long stretches of the river will be bypassed between the dam and powerhouse, with up to 85 – 90 per cent of the river flow in the winter diverted through the tunnels. Not only will this destroy riverine ecology, but a cascade of projects will mean that the river is in full flow only in brief stretches between two successive hydel projects.

For example, the Teesta V project being 'dedicated to the nation' today and being projected as being environmentally benign, involves the bypassing of 23 kms. of the Teesta river between the dam and powerhouse. The project has involved serious violation of green laws too during the construction phase. In 2007, the Sikkim Chief Secretary admitted to an environmental governance crisis in the 510 MW Teesta V project in an affidavit to the Supreme Court-appointed Central Empowered Committee. The affidavit said that the power company had "**grossly violated the terms, conditions and guidelines**" of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF) and dumped excavated material "**into the river Teesta obstructing its free flow causing thereby huge damage to the forest and environment.**" Information received through RTI by ACT reveals that project affected families increased to 928 as construction progressed, even though clearances were

obtained on grounds that only 72 families are being affected! This number is huge considering the small population of the tiny state.

This increase in affected persons occurred because the extensive tunneling using explosives in the fragile hill areas has led to huge landslides, drying up of water sources used for drinking water and irrigation purposes and cracking of houses. Due to the unprecedented impacts due to massive tunneling activities, which were hidden from the people as a projected impact at the time of environmental public hearings held before the Teesta V project was granted clearances, the power company NHPC had earned itself the name of '*uttani musa*' (mountain mouse) as it dug deep into the fragile mountains. The callous manner in which work was carried out is also revealed from the fact (information received by RTI) that at least 48 persons were killed during the construction of the Teesta V project. If we include grievously injured persons it adds up to 79.

Even after commissioning, the impacts continue. The opening and closing of the reservoir gates during monsoon floods resulted in sinking of lands around the reservoir area, which in turn damaged the properties of people. Due to shabby 'Reservoir Rim Treatment' work around the reservoir, people suffered loss of property during the last monsoons. During the winter, the flow downstream of the dam is reduced to a trickle having a serious impact on fisheries and aquatic ecology. Even the power generation (and the related revenues) have been affected by the flood and heavy siltation during the monsoons. This should have been obvious if a proper environmental risk assessment was done prior to grant of clearances to the project. **The above facts indicate that a thorough and independent review of the Teesta V project is urgently required at this point of time.**

Going beyond Teesta V, larger environmental governance issues on dams in the Teesta river basin need to be urgently addressed. The Teesta V project was granted environmental clearance by the MoEF in May 1999 on the condition that a carrying capacity study of the Teesta river basin will be conducted. The condition stated that: **"no other project in Sikkim will be considered for environmental clearance till the carrying capacity study is completed."** However, the MoEF not only considered projects for environmental clearance, but granted clearance to at least seven projects in Sikkim before the carrying capacity study was completed, in violation of its own mandatory condition! The 1200 MW Teesta III project was granted clearance to come up inside the Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve, while the 280 MW Panan project immediately bordering the Khangchendzonga National Park was also given a green signal. This is in spite of the recommendations of the National Wildlife Action Plan which requires a 10 km radius around sanctuaries and national parks to be declared as ecologically sensitive areas. In May 2009 the MoEF granted pre-construction clearance to the 520 MW Teesta IV project, even though it is coming up on the last remaining free-flowing stretch of the main Teesta river in Sikkim (between the under construction Teesta III project and the commissioned Teesta V project). These developments in Sikkim together with projects also coming up on the Teesta in neighbouring West Bengal signals the death of this beautiful river. In West Bengal, the TLDP III and IV hydroelectric projects are already under construction on the Teesta. Three more large hydro projects in the Teesta river basin in North Bengal were granted pre-construction clearance by the MoEF in June 2009! These are the TLDP I, TLDP II and Teesta Intermediate project.

ACT has demanded an immediate halt to the dams juggernaut in the Teesta river basin. Such a step is absolutely important for the ecological and security of the region, as well as the future of the Teesta river which the people of the region consider sacred.

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