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Catholics central in fight to close Indian nuclear facility

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | May. 29, 2012

S.P. Udayakumar is seen in a photo taken from the DiaNuke.org website [1]

From humble housewives to archbishops, Indian Catholics are deeply involved in the nonviolent campaign against the Koodankulam Nuclear Power Plant, dubbed by a nuclear watchdog group as the ?largest and most important anti-nuclear protest you don?t know about.?

Located in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the Russian-designed plant is slated to have six 1000MW reactors, making it perhaps the biggest nuclear power station in the world. One of the two reactors that have already been built is scheduled to go online in June.

Over the past eight months, as many as 10,000 Indian villagers, the majority of them women, have engaged in sit-ins, protest marches, shop and school closures, and rolling hunger strikes to prevent the plant?s start-up.

The movement?s epicenter is the courtyard of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Idinthakarai, a predominantly Catholic village located near the plant. Two Catholic priests are on the Coordinating Committee for the People?s Movement against Nuclear Energy (PMANE), a former priest is one of the movement?s prominent spokespersons, and local prelates have spoken out in support of the protestors despite pressure from the government not to do so.

On May 22, the coordinating committee announced they had collected ?tens of thousands of signatures? from 60 villages opposing the nuclear complex.

A spokesperson with the committee said 24,000 villagers had relinquished their voter ID cards in protest of government indifference to the ?lives and sentiments? of ordinary Indians. Organizers said the cards were to be turned over to revenue officials as part of the ?Respect India? campaign, an initiative inspired by the Quit India movement launched during the country?s independence struggle.

?Just as the freedom fighters asked the colonial rulers to quit India, we, the People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy (PMANE) fighters request the corrupt and ruling class in India to ?respect India,? respect the Indian citizens lives, rights, and entitlements,? committee spokesperson Dr. S.P. Udayakumar told *The Times of India* on May 8.

The following day, several thousand police were deployed to the Koodankulam area and a one month curfew imposed on villages within about four miles of the power plant. The police action evoked sharp criticism from a former chief justice who said he would forward the issue to India?s National Human Rights Commission.

The judge?s intervention marks the latest development in a remarkably tenacious, high-stakes struggle over nuclear power in India that pits poor fisher folk, many of them Catholic, against the country?s state and central governments.

Initiated in the late 1980s as a joint Russo-Indian venture, the nuclear power complex has proceeded in fits and starts in the last several decades.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has made nuclear power one of the cornerstones of his energy policy and scientists and government officials backing the nuclear complex say it will provide much needed power to the electricity-deprived region of Tamil Nadu.

But the plant?s opponents say the nuclear project is being pushed forward without a thorough risk-assessment and consultation with the local population.

?The Indian nuclear authorities have not shared any basic information about the project with the public. They do not give complete and truthful answers for our questions on the ?daily routine emissions? from these reactors, the amount and management of nuclear wastes, fresh water needs, impact of the coolant water on our food and seafood, decommissioning costs and effects, Russian liability and so forth. We are deeply disturbed by this,? wrote Udayakumar in an April letter explaining the anti-nuke campaign.

While opposition to the power plant has been ongoing, protests intensified last summer in the wake of Japan?s Fukushima catastrophe and the Indian government?s announcement of a ?hot run? of one of the reactors.

The nuclear complex is located in a tsunami- and earthquake-prone region. Tamil Nadu recently experienced tremors from the April earthquake in Indonesia. A resettlement colony for victims of a 2004 tsunami that killed

To put it all in a nutshell, this is a classic David-Goliath fight between the ordinary citizens of India and the powerful Indian government supported by the rich Indian capitalists, MNCs (multi-national corporations), imperial powers and the global nuclear mafia.

They promise FDI (Foreign Direct Investment), nuclear power, development, atom bombs, security and superpower status. We demand risk-free electricity, ?Respect India,? respect the natural resources, sustainable development and harmless future.

They say the Russian nuclear power plants are safe and can withstand earthquakes and tsunamis. But we worry about their sideeffects and after-effects.

They speak for their scientist friends and business partners and have their eyes on commissions and kickbacks. But we fight for our children and grandchildren, our progeny, our animals and birds, our land, water, sea, air and the skies.

--April 25 statement by leaders of the People?s Movement against Nuclear Energy (PMANE), Tamil Nadu, India

8,000 people in the state sits in close proximity to the plant.

Organizers with the coordinating committee opposing the plant said villagers became especially alarmed when a government mock drill on what to do in case of an emergency included instructions to cover your nose and mouth and run for your life.

Work on the nuclear plant came to a standstill at the end of last year amid a campaign of intensive protest. State officials asked the central government to halt construction until the fears of the local people could be allayed.

But in March, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Dr. Selvi Jayalalithaa gave the project the go-ahead after two panels of experts, commissioned by the central and state governments, approved the nuclear power plant.

The governments? efforts to quell the nonviolent campaign against the plant have been significant. There have been mass arrests and the protestors report ?stalking? by intelligence officials, attacks by political party thugs, and police intimidation.

A fact-finding report by journalists and academics who visited Idinthakarai in late March said between September and December of 2011, a single police station filed citations against a record 55,795 people. Of these, 6,800 were charged with ?sedition? and ?waging war against the state,? perhaps ?the largest ever number in British or independent India for one police station,? the report said.

Indian authorities have accused leaders with the coordinating committee, including Udayakumar, of terrorism and ?attempt to murder.?

The Catholic church has not been exempt from the fray. According to the Union of Catholic Asian News (UCAN), India?s federal Home Ministry froze two bank accounts belonging to the Tuticorin diocese in February, claiming it had used foreign funds to aid the protestors, a violation of India?s Foreign [Contribution] Regulation Act. A team from the ministry had raided the diocesan offices the previous month.

The government?s actions prompted an outcry from prelates in the region as well as the archbishop of New Delhi, India?s capital. At a March 8 press conference, Tamil Nadu prelates denied the allegation of misuse of foreign funds and requested the Indian prime minister ?stop harassing the Christian community.?

?Pro-nature is [the church?s] stand internationally,? said Madras-Mylapore Archbishop A.M. Chinnappa who, later that month, visited the protestors as they were ending one of their fasts.

?Just because I sympathize with my people you cannot say I am inciting them,? Bishop Yvon Ambroise of Tuticorin told UCAN. He later said the hierarchy could not stop the campaign because the villagers ?would go ahead with their protests even without us.?

The bishops? appeal to the government apparently had little effect. In late April, a UCAN news update titled ?Church exit plans angers anti-nuclear protestors,? quotes Fr. William Santharam, spokesperson for the Tuticorin diocese, as advising the activists not to go against the government and to ?act prudently.? The article said church leaders allegedly changed their stance after federal agencies froze the bank accounts.

Before the nuclear plant begins operations, protesters say they want the state and central government to institute an independent committee of experts to study the geology, hydrology and seismology of the project; consult with local people; conduct disaster management and evacuation exercises for all peoples within a 30 km radius of the plant; and disclose the 2008 intergovernmental agreement between India and Russia on nuclear liability as well as the plant?s waste management plan.

Although they have called off the latest hunger strike launched May 1, the campaign against the plant shows no sign of abating. Upon learning of the accusations against Udayakumar, a widely admired peace scholar who obtained a doctorate in political science from the University of Hawaii, a group of American academics circulated an open letter to Indian government officials urging them to ?address their concerns scientifically and honestly.? Signators included Nobel Peace Laureate Mairead Maguire.

On May 19, South Asian activists from several anti-nuclear and human rights groups held a protest against the plant in front of the Indian High Commission in London.

Eight British lawmakers recently wrote to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha in protest of the plant and the Indian governments? treatment of the demonstrators. Udayakumar is also asking his U.S. colleagues to urge their Congressional representatives to issue a statement calling for a stop to the plant?s planned use.

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[1] "http://www.dianuke.org/interview-s-p-udayakumar/"