Let the 450 Bengal Tigers Survive

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Sundarbans Campaign Heats Up

On a visit to Bangladesh some months ago, US President Clinton expressed his deep concern about environmental degradation in poor countries like this one. He was surprised, as the rest of the world might be too, to hear about the country's natural wealth in the form of the world's largest mangrove forest. However, the Bangladeshi government has teamed up with transnational energy companies to exploit this valuable natural heritage.

The name of this forest is Sundarbans, which means "beautiful forest" in Bengali. And a beautiful forest it is! Located in the southwestern part of Bangladesh, Sundarbans covers an area of 6,017 square kilometers and boasts a great diversity of wildlife. The remaining highly endangered and magnificent Royal Bengal Tigers make their home in Sundarbans, as do leopards, tigers, wild dogs, bears, barking and spotted deer, wild boar, otters, monitor lizards, snakes, river terapins, turtles, crabs, shrimp, pangolins, dolphins, owls, cranes, doves, woodpeckers and pigeons. Furthermore, Sundarbans contains several varieties of tree species with direct economic, ecological and aesthetic value for the people of Bangladesh.

Currently, many Bangladeshi citizens depend on the resources of Sundarbans for their livelihoods. Forest peoples use shells, fuel wood and wood pulp, eat crabs, shrimp, and fish, and extract honey from the forest for their survival. Although the forest resources of Bangladesh contribute a mere 3-4 percent to the country's GDP, the intangible social, aesthetic and historical value of these forests is immeasurable. The forests also play an important regulatory role in a country highly vulnerable to flooding and other cataclysms. In recognition of the environmental, economic and spiritual significance of Sundarbans, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has declared this forest a world heritage site.

Ironically, the Bangladeshi government has forest by solidifying an agreement with multinational oil companies that allows them to explore for oil and gas in Sundarbans. The Shell oil and Cairn energy multinationals are set to begin exploration in "block 5" of Bangladesh, which will seriously impact this mangrove forest.

FoE Bangladesh is determined to avoid a situation like the one we've heard about from Friends of the Earth Nigeria, where Shell has adversely impacted the environment and livelihoods of people in the Niger Delta. We have decided to target the oil companies directly, and particularly Shell, as our government is not receptive to the opinions of Bangladeshi citizens. Together with our FoE colleagues in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, we are working on a campaign strategy to put pressure on Shell. We are also working in coalition with other organizations including the Mangrove Action Project, Global Response, the World Rainforest Movement, Corporate Watch US, and Oilwatch International. We have already carried out some successful presswork and posting around Bangladesh, and we plan to demonstrate peacefully in front of Shell's office in Bangladesh with the slogan "Shell, Get Your Ass Out of Block 5, Let the 450 Bengal Tigers Survive".

We would like to ask all FoE member groups to join us in this campaign against Shell, and for the people, the forests and the tigers of Bangladesh.