

Down To Earth

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Brothers and sisters

India needs a different tribal leadership



Meghalaya: no uranium mining

Andhra police fire on farmers

Aligarh's chemical scourge

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Flow row

Project spawns local water rights dispute in Nepal

RAJESH GHIMIRE *Kathmandu*

NEPAL'S multimillion-dollar project for supplying drinking water to the parched Kathmandu valley has left residents of Melamchi valley fuming. The reason: water will be diverted from the latter region to benefit the former.

Activists of the Melamchi Local Concern Group (MLCG) have locked horns with the Melamchi Water Supply Project (MWSP) officials. The MLCG members are demanding better water rights and compensation.

MWSP is an inter-basin project that would supply water from the snow-fed Melamchi river in the Kosi basin in Sindupalchowk district. It lies to the northeast of Kathmandu valley, which is located in the Bagmati basin. The plan stipulates that 170 million litres per day (mld) of water be diverted from Melamchi river through a 26-kilometre (km)-long tunnel.

The project is expected to ensure 24-hour water supply to 1.5 million inhabitants of Kathmandu valley. The area has an estimated water demand of 189 mld. While the supply hovers around 132 mld in the rainy season, it plummets to 93 mld during summers.

The project will provide 400 litres of water per second to people living downstream, says Madan Sankar Shrestha, deputy executive director of MWSP. Officials claim that this would be sufficient to fulfil the requirements of farmers in the Melamchi valley. Dronaraj Ghimire, an environmental engineer affiliated with the Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists, says that although the supply will meet the current demand in the region, no future irrigation projects will be possible.

However, Ram Bahadur Khadka, a local activist and spokesperson of MLCG, is not convinced. "Unless the quantity of water is increased, 75 families will be displaced from Melamchi valley," he contends. The project also poses a threat to the forests in the region. Local people allege that the Royal Nepal Army, mobilised for the security of the project, cleared forestland in the hills of Melamchi valley. ■

MoEF'S FLIP-FLOP

On the eve of his retirement on June 29, director general of forests M K Sharma announced that the Union ministry of environment and forests (MoEF) was going to let private parties breed and harvest wild animals — the musk deer to begin with. As expected, hardcore conservationists tore down the proposal because it dared to adopt a rational approach. The issue was given a summary burial by the MoEF itself later. "Right now there is no such plan. The Union ministry of health and family welfare is carrying out experiments on musk extraction. However, the current laws do not permit commercial breeding," the MoEF stated. Sadly, the debate to rescue India's wildlife from the clutches of the conservation orthodoxy refuses to gather steam.

Power transfer

MFP management in TN tribals' hands

E VIJAYALAKSHMI

IN A landmark decision, the Tamil Nadu (TN) government has handed over complete charge of minor forest produce (MFP) to tribal people living in and around the forests of the state. Consequently, from July 1 onwards, not only have the tribals been given the right to collect MFP, they are also vested with the authority to take all decisions pertaining to it.

The government order requires tribals in each village to form village forest councils (VFCs). These bodies will elect a 9-to-12-member executive committee and a president with a fixed tenure of five years. The panel will include the local forest ranger who will facilitate and supervise the setting up of the VFCs. "The councils will be free to collect MFP, add value to it and sell it in the open market," says a senior state forest department (FD) official.

The rationale for the initiative, according to the FD, is "the welfare of the tribals". Pratim Roy of Keystone

FOLLOW-UP

NO LET-UP: Even as Brahmaputra river, its tributaries and waterbodies in the Barak valley continue to be in spate in Assam, five districts of Bihar are also reeling under the impact of floods caused by relentless rain in the upper catchment areas.

In the northeastern state, several areas are still inundated due to the monsoon (see: *Down To Earth*, Vol 12, No 4, July 15, 2003) with over nine lakh people in 19 districts being affected. The situation is grim in Bihar, too, where agricultural and low-lying areas — including a few blocks of Muzaffarpur and Sitamarhi — have borne the brunt of the downpour.

Foundation, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) working with the tribals of the Nilgiris, welcomes the development: "The government order is a bold step."

Earlier, marketing and procurement of MFP was in the hands of the government-run Large-Sized Multi-Purpose Cooperative Societies (LAMPS). However, discrepancies crept into their functioning. "Some LAMPS were being sub-leased to non-tribals," alleges an FD official. Illegal collection and harvesting of MFP were also rampant.

With the order, at least Rs 1 crore

out of the total revenue of Rs 2 crore from MFPs is expected to reach tribals directly. But Roy sounds a note of caution. He points out that the order will not benefit tribals unless it is accompanied by sound systems which would enable resource monitoring, local value addition and secured returns.

The project may face teething troubles with regard to organising tribals as they might still have to operate through traders. Yet these difficulties are not likely to prove insurmountable if self-help groups and NGOs are asked to lend a hand. ■

Home run

J&K halts export of willow clefts used for making cricket bats



Second innings

ISHFAQ-UL-HASSAN Srinagar

GOING in to bat for the indigenous industry, the Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) government has decided to ban the export of willow cleft outside the state. The much-awaited move is set to put local manufacturers of cricket bats on a strong wicket. Over the years, the local manufacturers had lost out to competitors based in cities such as Jalandhar (Punjab) and Meerut (Uttar Pradesh), who thrived on imports of willow from Kashmir.

"In one stroke, the government has paved the way for the employment of 8000 people," claims Nazir Ahmad Saloor, secretary, Jammu and Kashmir Sports Goods Manufacturing Association. The ban is a part of the state's new forest management policy which envisages greater involvement of

local people to increase green cover.

The fresh measures were announced in the J&K legislative assembly by the state's forest and environment minister, Ghulam Mohidin Sofi. Divulging more details, he said that those who would provide timely information about smuggling in forests will be awarded 10-15 per cent of the total cost

of the seized timber. Thirty-two forest development agencies will also be set up under the National Afforestation Programme. "A part of the revenue from selling produce such as medicinal plants, grass and fodder from the concerned area would be spent on the development of nearby habitations," revealed Sofi.

In addition to these steps, the forest department's budget has been increased from Rs 8 crore to Rs 10 crore. The State Pollution Control Board, too, has been given more teeth and its recommendations made obligatory.

"All these schemes have been formulated to save the fragile environment of the state," points out P Patnaik, principal chief conservator of forests, J&K. Alarmingly, the past decade has seen more than 1,30,000 full-grown trees being illegally felled in the state. ■

I N S H O R T

► **SELLAFIELD 'SAFE':** An international tribunal has rejected Ireland's plea to shut down the UK's Sellafield nuclear plant due to lack of evidence to show that it poses any "serious risk of irreparable harm". The plant also got a clean chit from the UK's Food Standards Agency, which declared that alleged traces of radioactive waste found in salmon sold in the country were below permitted levels. The waste was said to be from the Sellafield unit.

► **HELLHOLE:** Seventeen miners died recently following the flooding of a mine in the state-owned Singareni Collieries Company Limited's Godavarikhani coalfield in Karimnagar district of Andhra Pradesh. Four senior officials of the company were suspended after a preliminary probe found them guilty of not adhering to safety norms.

► **SPROUTING THREAT:** The dispute over genetically modified (GM) crops is set to intensify with the reported evolution of "superweeds" which are resistant to powerful herbicides that transgenic crops were engineered to withstand. A research paper reveals that in the past seven years, up to five wild plant species have been found to be immune to the weed-killer glyphosate (best known by the Monsanto trade name Roundup).

► **BELATED CLEANSING:** After a 25-year-long battle, environmentalists and residents of Teshima Island in Japan have finally tasted success. They managed to secure a cleanup of the region, which has for decades served as an illegal dumping ground for trash and toxic waste of Japan's powerful industries.

► **DIETARY PRECAUTION:** Future mums should reduce their consumption of dairy products and fatty meats long before they plan pregnancy to protect their foetuses from dioxins. This was revealed by the Institute of Medicine (which is part of the Washington DC-based National Academy of Sciences). Dioxins, produced by industrial incineration, contaminate air, water and soil, and then build up in the fatty tissues of humans and animals.

► **FEEBLE FOLLOW-UP:** After 18 years of the leakage incident at Union Carbide's Bhopal plant, India has finally asked the US to hand over the then chief executive officer of the company, Warren M Anderson. A non-binding warrant has been pending against Anderson since April 1992. But it is unlikely that the US will accede to the request.