Move worries global experts

A group of independent experts on Tuesday expressed their concern over the proposed Phulbari open-pit coal mine project because the mining could displace hundreds of thousands of people and lead to the violation of fundamental human rights.

The experts in a press release urged the Bangladesh government to ensure that any policy concerning open-pit coal mining includes robust safeguards to protect human rights and not to proceed with the project.

The group, describing themselves as United Nations independent experts, representing different working fields and rights issues,

warned that the project would displace vulnerable farming communities, and threaten the livelihoods of thousands more by doing irreversible damage to water sources and ecosystems in the region.

They also mentioned that an estimated 50,000 to 130,000 people would be immediately displaced by the project, with up to 220,000 potentially affected over time as irrigation channels and wells dry up.

‘We welcome Prime Minister Hasina’s acknowledgement that coal extraction in Bangladesh would threaten densely populated areas,’ the release said.

Hasina at the inauguration of the 53rd council of the Institute of Engineers, Bangladesh, on January 14 said that the government would not extract coal from the deposits as they were under highly populated areas.

The experts warned that mixed messages were emerging and investors continued to push forward.

A 15-member expert committee led by Petrobangla’s former chairman Mosharraf Hossain is now reviewing a proposed coal policy and will soon submit their report to the government suggesting the probable methods of coal extraction from the deposits in the country.

Replying to a question, Mosharraf told New Age that the committee would suggest the government to make a demonstration project of open-pit coal mine at the north-western area of the Barapukuria coal deposit where the coal seams were comparatively at shallow depth.

‘The demonstration would give us real-time data particularly about the possible desertification for open-pit mining in Bangladesh. If we find any possibility of disastrous effect on environment,
population and agriculture for open pit mining we will not prefer the method for coal extraction,’ he added.

Asia Energy in October 2005 submitted a feasibility study to the government to extract coal from the 572 million tonnes deposit at Phulbari through open pit mining over the next 36 years.

The Phulbari project was postponed and on 26 August 2006, members of Bangladesh Rifles gunned down three locals — Salekin, Tariqul, and Amin — who were participating in a peaceful demonstration against the open-pit mining method.

Asia Energy subsequently took a new name, Global Coal Management, and continued to pursue the project and has gone on lobbying for permission to use the open-pit mining method.

According to a cable posted by WikiLeaks which was sent in July 2009, the former US ambassador in Bangladesh JF Moriarty held talks with the prime minister’s energy adviser, Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury, urging him to approve plans by the UK-based company.

Tawfiq had assured the US of drumming up support for the controversial Phulbari coal project of Asia Energy through the parliamentary process.

The members of the parliamentary standing committee on the power, energy and mineral resources ministry, in October, 2010, were taken on a visit to coalmines in Germany, and after returning they recommended for open-pit mining.

In the release, Olivier De Schutter, special rapporteur on the right to food, said, ‘Nearly half the Bangladeshi population is food insecure, and nearly one quarter severely food insecure. Local food production should be strengthened, not sacrificed for industrial projects.’

He also warned that a large number of the population would be deprived from accessing drinking water and more than a thousand fisheries and 50,000 fruit trees would be destroyed if the project would be implemented.

Special Rapporteurs on adequate housing and indigenous peoples Raquel Rolnik and James Anaya warned that it would not be acceptable if the large scale of people, particularly indigenous people, would be displaced without their consent and would pose an immediate threat to safety and standards of living.

Among others, special rapporteurs Frank La Rue, Maina Kiai and Magdalena Sepúlveda explained their stand on the proposed Phulbari coal project in the perspective of freedom of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association, and extreme poverty and human rights.