INDIA: Tribal Movements Score Historic Victory Against Multinational Corporation

In August 2010, after years of pressure from tribal activists with support of Indian and international human rights groups, Indian Minister of Environment and Forests Jairam Ramesh rejected a bid by Vedanta Resources to mine bauxite from the sacred Niyamgiri Hills of the Dongria Kondh tribe. Ramesh and state authorities blocked the bid on the grounds that it would be detrimental to the rights and livelihoods of the nearly 8,000 Dongria Kondh people, result in the loss of habitat of rare flora and fauna, and destroy an elephant corridor. It would have also violated the Forest Conservation Act and, more importantly, the Forest Rights Act, which was enacted in 2006 in an effort to correct the historical injustices committed against forest dwellers.

The welcome decision has come after months of high-pressure lobbying by Vedanta and industry supporters, countered on the ground by rallies and aggressive information campaigns mounted by many activist and citizens’ groups. The Dongria Kondh’s struggle has found support around the world. On hearing the Ministry’s decision, one campaigner stated, “This is a victory no one believed possible… a litmus test of whether a small, marginalized community could stand up to a massive multinational company.”

Ramesh’s decision came in the wake of an expert panel report, headed by National Advisory Council member N. C. Saxena, that was “of the firm view that allowing mining in the proposed mining lease area… would shake the faith of tribal people in the laws of the land.” Yet the upholding of the findings of the Saxena team owes a great deal to the independence of India’s processes of law, which were underscored again on July 19th when, in another mining case, the Supreme Court termed developmental policies as “blinker.” Sunita Narain, a political activist and director of the Centre for Science and Environment, stressed that the victory of the Dongria Kondh must be viewed as a victory of the Forest Rights Act and of local resistance over international corporate power.

Click here for the full report "PUSHBACK: Local Power, Global Realignment," which takes stock of the current status of forest rights and tenure globally, assesses the key issues and events of 2010 that shape possibilities to improve local rights and livelihoods, and identifies key questions and challenges that the world will face in 2011.