

To

Dr. Manmohan Singh
Prime Minister of India
Prime Minister's Office
South Block, Raisina Hill
New Delhi 110 011

Dear Prime Minister

**Sub: A Joint Statement by People's Movements and Civil Society Groups
demanding an immediate rollback of hasty environment & forest clearances**

We, representatives of social movements, civil society organisations, researchers, academicians and concerned individuals strongly object to the UPA government's mandate to the new Minister of Environment and Forest, Mr. Veerappa Moily. The recent measures taken by the Minister to grant speedy approvals and relax regulatory procedures has sent a clear signal that environmental protection and people's livelihoods are to be ignored in order to project an industry friendly image of the government. Moily, who took additional charge as Environment Minister on 24th December 2013 is also the Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas, this is a fundamental case of bad governance and conflict of interest. He has openly stated in the media, that he has cleared over 70 projects in the first 20 days of being the Environment Minister.

The above approvals include the highly controversial steel plant of POSCO in Odisha and two coal mining projects of Central and Western coalfields in Chhindwara (Madhya Pradesh), Vizhinjam International Container Transshipment Terminal at Trivandrum.¹ It also includes MOEF's new exceptions to coal mines producing 8 million tonnes annually to expand their capacity by up to 50 per cent without consulting project-affected communities through public hearings.²

Mr. Moily's clearance spree is sending out clear signals that the UPA government is going all out to appease corporate India. Corporate India has claimed, falsely, that the Environment Ministry is holding back clearance for key projects and thus affecting the economy, even though the MoEF has rejected virtually no projects over the last several years. Earlier attempts of over-riding key environmental laws and processes of the government has included the setting up of the Cabinet Committee on Investments (CCI) to pressure the Environment Ministry to grant approvals without waiting for necessary studies or procedures to be completed. The Environment Ministry has either played along or buckled under pressure to grant clearances.

Significantly many of these projects cleared in the UPA government's last quarter before the national elections have been pending final go ahead from the Ministry on critical concerns related to significant social and environmental impacts. One of the first approvals granted by the Minister was to the steel plant and captive port of the

¹ See: http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2014-01-14/india/46184707_1_environment-clearance-environmental-clearance-power-project

² See: <http://moef.nic.in/sites/default/files/OM%2007.01.2014.pdf>

M/s POSCO (India) Ltd by delinking it from the captive port project which has been an integral part of POSCO's industrial expansion plans in the area. The clearance was granted close on the heels of the South Korean President visiting India. This is despite a history of regulatory violations recorded by the ministry's own expert committees in the past and a decade long ongoing protest by local communities against the project. (http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2014-01-10/india/46065524_1_odisha-project-steel-plant-environment-clearance).

A recent circular by the Ministry of Coal on 15th January 2014 to 61 coal block allottees states that cases where Stage II forest clearance has not been obtained will be reviewed by the Coal Ministry. If Stage II clearance is not obtained by February 5, these blocks are likely to be de-allocated. This list includes controversial coal blocks such as Mahan (Madhya Pradesh) and Gare Palma IV/6 (Chhattisgarh) with high social and ecological impacts. As a result, there is a very real fear that the corporates concerned will be pressuring the UPA for approvals, even though the mandatory processes for Stage II forest clearance have not been fulfilled in letter and spirit.

There are also fears that with the current spate of clearances the ministry will permit the field trials of Genetically Modified (GM) crops, which has been held back so far on the basis of sound scientific evidences. A Technical Expert Committee (TEC) set up by the Supreme Court, in its final report in 2013, pointed out the potential for GM crop field trials to contaminate biodiversity, food and seed supply and recommended halting field trials until the regulatory system is made robust. It has been recently reported that the Mr Moily will concur with the view of the Agriculture Minister and file a joint affidavit in the SC to allow GM field trials overlooking the exhaustive TEC report.

Activists and researchers working on hydropower issues have also raised serious concerns related to the appointment of a minister who has in the past openly supported specific hydropower projects and even directed states like Arunachal Pradesh to "fast-track" hydel projects. This includes pushing for projects in regions where there have been massive protests or where project authorities have tried to circumvent environment clearance procedures.³

The undersigned have come together through this statement to strongly and vehemently object to the shoddy manner in which environment and social concerns are being dealt with by the Environment Ministry in particular and the UPA government in general, despite the lip service paid to these issues by prominent party leaders. Such blatant and brazen disregard to legal procedures and the rights of locally affected people completely undermine both Forest Conservations Act and Forest Rights Act, something that UPA routinely showcases as one of its flagship legislations.

³ See: <http://www.change.org/en-IN/petitions/government-of-india-the-same-minister-for-oil-and-environment-how-is-that-reasonable>

As the head of the Government, we strongly demand that you intervene so that all the clearances granted by the Environment Ministry under Mr. Moily so far are rolled back with immediate effect, and that the ministry carefully considers each project with total transparency before taking any decision.

We also demand that the government publicly affirm that the primary mandate of the Environment Ministry is not to grant clearances and subvert legal procedures but to protect the environment, making it an essential player in the UPA's stated mandate of inclusive growth.

Copy to:

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Smt Sonia Gandhi, Chairperson Indian National Congress party, 10, Janpath Road, New Delhi 110 001

Shri Rahul Gandhi, Vice President of the Indian National Congress party, 12, Tughlak Lane, New Delhi 110 011

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