

India Court Orders Uranium Corp. to Probe Deformities Near Mines

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August 21, 2014 – India's sole uranium mining company is being ordered by a regional court to disclose radiation levels and the presence of any heavy metals in soil and water in a cluster of villages with reports of unusual numbers of deformed and sick children.

The order by the Jharkhand High Court also mandates that Uranium Corp. of India Ltd. explain how it ensures the safety of nearby civilian populations who may be exposed to its 193-acre (78-hectare) radioactive waste dump near the village of Jadugora in eastern India.

The move comes about a month after a Bloomberg News story chronicled the plight of parents living near the Uranium Corp. mines who are seeking answers to what's sickening and killing so many of their kids. The story also reported that local residents routinely wander the unfenced dump sites and fish and bathe in a river that receives water flowing from the dumps, known as tailings ponds. The Bloomberg article was submitted to the judges of the High Court by Ananda Sen, the lawyer appointed by the court to review the case.

Uranium Corp. has denied its mining operations have anything to do with village health issues. In



The Uranium Corp. of India Ltd. facility stands in Jadugora
Photographer: Manjunath Kiran/AFP/Getty Images

2007, a survey of more than 2,100 households by an Indian physicians group found mothers in villages 1.5 miles from the mines reported congenital deformities more than 80 percent higher than the rates just 20 miles (32 kilometers) away, with reported child death rates from such abnormalities more than five times as high.

Independent Experts

The court order stopped short of requiring independent experts to conduct long-term studies of village health issues to get to the bottom of the mystery, which had been called for by outsiders, leaving the probe in the hands of the company. Uranium Corp. "is at liberty to take assistance of any expert, as they deem fit," according to the document, issued on Aug. 7 by

Chief Justice R. Banumathi.

One Indian nuclear power expert who has been following the matter said he doubted that leaving the investigation with the company would resolve the issue. “I can’t imagine any UCIL committee would find a problem with their Jaduguda operations,” said M.V. Ramana, a physicist and India nuclear-energy specialist at Princeton University’s Nuclear Futures Laboratory, said in an e-mail interview, using an alternate spelling of Jadugora. “The only way this could provide any meaningful input into the debate over whether there is cause for concern in UCIL operations is if the court orders were very specific.”

Biased Findings

Uranium Corp. Chairman Diwakar Acharya told Bloomberg News in a July 14 interview that physically deformed people living near the mines may have been “imported from elsewhere” to smear the company’s reputation. Activists and doctors come with an agenda to Jadugora, he said, dismissing as biased any findings of a correlation between the mines and deformities in nearby villages.

Sen, the lawyer, had earlier said he was considering asking for an independent investigation. However, there weren’t any freestanding agencies in India with the expertise to carry out the studies, Sen said.

“No foreign agency will be allowed to monitor or study the nuclear industry and no court is going to even consider that suggestion,” Sen said in a telephone interview on Aug. 19. “So let Uranium Corp. do the study and let’s see what it says. Their report is not final and the court

has the option to either accept it or reject it.”

During the hearing this month, officials from Uranium Corp. and the Department of Atomic Energy assured the chief judge of the high court there were no threats to the environment or the health of people near the mines, said Rajesh Shankar, the lawyer representing the Jharkhand state government.

Not Satisfied

“The court was not satisfied, because these congenital diseases are occurring, mainly with children in that area,” Shankar said in a phone interview on Aug. 19. “These things can’t be denied, these things are there in that village.”

Uranium Corp. spokesman Pinaki Roy didn’t answer two calls and a text message to his mobile phone yesterday seeking comments. An e-mail to Acharya and Roy went unanswered.

The court chose Uranium Corp. to form the inspection team because it has expertise in the subject, said M. Khan, an assistant solicitor general of India and the lawyer representing the federal government and the Department of Atomic Energy.

“They’re regularly inspecting and monitoring the matter,” Khan said by phone on Aug. 19. “They are examining everything, whether there’s any effect of radiation or not. That’s why the direction is that UCIL, with the cooperation of other state institutions, will make the inspection and they will submit the report.”

Doubtful Job

Ramana of Princeton said a proper investigation would include a thorough survey of diseases both in villages near the mines and

those farther away; extensive measuring of a broad range of potential contaminants in the environment and inside peoples' homes; and a careful examination of water, soil and food. Ramana has written extensively about Jadugora and has previously called for testing in the area to explain the apparent cluster of physical deformities.

The court in its order said doctors and experts should be included in the inspection team. It didn't list what sort of scientific measures it expected the Uranium Corp.-appointed panel to carry out.

Swollen Heads

The health issue came to the attention of the High Court earlier this year after pictures of Jadugora's deformed children appeared in the Indian press. The court in February ordered Uranium Corp. to produce documents that might shed light on the health issues. The court noted then that children living near the mines in

Jadugora are "born with swollen heads, blood disorders and skeletal distortions."

Uranium Corp., which employs about 5,000 people in the mining and processing of uranium, has been operating the mines in Jadugora since 1967. It also runs the Turamdih mines about 12 miles away, near the city of Jamshedpur, which has a population of more than 1 million.

India plans to increase nuclear power generation capacity 13-fold to 62,000 megawatts by 2032. Of the nation's 20 nuclear reactors currently in commercial operation, half are eligible to use imported uranium under International Atomic Energy Agency rules, Jitendra Singh, an official in India's prime minister's office, said in a written reply to questions in parliament on July 16.

The 10 others need locally produced fuel, he said.

—Editors: Jason Rogers, Andrew Hobbs