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ENVIRONMENT-INDIA: All Eyes on Forest Protection Body

By **Keya Acharya**

KOTAGIRI, NILGIRI MOUNTAINS, India, Mar 15, 2010 (IPS) - Seemingly unstoppable development has made a mockery of the protected status of this southern Indian region, which houses vast biodiversity and some of the finest examples of moist deciduous and tropical forests.

In the last decade alone, the urban sprawl has reached these mountains, which have seen forests give way to more and more human settlements, as well as to a wide range of commercial activities.

But a newly resurrected people's movement may yet reverse that trend. Just recently, it successfully lobbied India's environment minister to set up a separate, legally empowered authority for protecting the ancient forests here.

And so members of the Save Western Ghats Movement who had assembled here in Kotagiri for their annual meeting heard Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh tell them, "The Western Ghats Ecological Authority will start by demarcating ecologically sensitive regions in the hill areas within 90 days and will either stop further economic activity or regulate it according to the sensitivity of the region."

On Mar. 4 too, the Ministry of Environment and Forests constituted the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel. It also announced that eminent scientist and former Indian Institute of Science professor Madhav Gadgil would be heading the 14-member panel.

Covering 150,000 square kilometres, the Western Ghats traverse 1,600 km through the six states of Gujarat, Goa, Maharashtra, Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. The Ghats, also known as Sahyadri in Maharashtra, has 5,000 species of flowering plants, 139 mammal species, 508 bird species, and 179 amphibian species. At least 325 of these are globally threatened species, such as the Asian elephant and the tiger.

Its complex network of 22 rivers provides nearly 40 percent of India's water-catchment systems.

In 1986, as part of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) Man and Biosphere programme, 5,520 sq km of the Western Ghats was conferred special protected status as the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve.

UNESCO is also due shortly to confer World Heritage status to the Western Ghats.

For all these, the Western Ghats has not escaped the pressure of an ever-increasing population and the interest of business groups, which have built everything from homes to roads, to power plants across the region. Mountain ranges have also been dug up by various mining companies, sealing the Ghats' growing reputation as among the Indian regions that are being summarily destroyed by development.

Keystone Foundation, a prominent local non-government group that is part of the Save Western Ghats Movement, says that the original natural cover in the ghats declined by 40 percent between 1920 and 1990, resulting in a four-fold increase in forest fragmentation and an 83 percent reduction in forest patches.

Delhi-based environmental lawyer Ritwick Dutta, who is acknowledged as the movement's legal face, describes the destruction in the mountains here as "eco-disaster due to governance failure of an unparalleled nature".

He points to India's system of environmental clearances for projects, which the Delhi High Court itself says has resulted in an "unhealthy" rate of approval of projects. Says Dutta, referring to the ghats: "There is an urgency here to declare the area an ecologically sensitive zone."

It was that urgency that precipitated the resurrection last year of the Save Western Ghats Movement, which first rose to prominence in the 1980s. At the height of its popularity, it had involved over 20 local and regional people's movements that got together to march the length of the Western Ghats between November 1987 and February 1988.

The march was an awareness campaign and protest in one, aimed at the rash of dam and power-station construction in the protected region.

Movements under this banner influenced government policy in the felling of trees in Karnataka. In 1984, then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was even prompted to halt a dam project in Silent Valley in Kerala and instead declare the area a national park.

While the movement today is smaller than its previous version, it is once more gaining momentum and putting pressure on the government.

At the very least, the movement expects the new expert panel to monitor and regulate all human activity – including commercial concerns – in the Western Ghats. But it has also said that it wants the Indian government to ensure that the Ghats forms part of the programme under the National Action Plan on Climate Change.

Moreover, it wants the respective state governments of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Kerala, and Goa to pay special attention to implementing the conservation clauses under the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, stop all mining activities in areas under their ambit, and work out alternatives to large thermal and hydropower projects.

The environment and forests ministry, for its part, says that it will be furnished with a report by the Western Ghats Ecology Panel within six months from the date of the body's constitution. A comprehensive consultation process involving the local people and governments of all the concerned states will take place after that, the ministry also says. Ramesh told IPS as well that the new ecological authority will be a "statutory authority" that will have full powers to stop, or regulate, all "economic activity" in the ghats.

In the meantime, he has put a moratorium on further mining activity in Goa, after activists Claude Alvares and Carmen Miranda, who are among the movement's most well-known members, presented a picture of devastation

Over the last two weeks an international team of IPS reporters have filed daily updates on the 54th session of the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), and the continuing 2010 challenges of holding governments accountable to the promises made fifteen years ago in Beijing.

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there due to mining.

Ramesh had told the movement's members at its gathering here: "My ministry is not on a different wavelength than you. We are partners."

He said that the government has been aware of the need for conservation of the Western Ghats in the last two decades, instituting its protected area status, and designating funds for its development.

A carbon sequestration quantification study done has shown that the Western Ghats captures about one percent of India's total greenhouse gas emissions, the minister also said, noting the still-intact quality of these forests.

"The challenge for us in the ghats," said Ramesh, "is to find an economic growth pattern that is also ecologically sustainable." (END)

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