

India: Major Protest Demands Coca-Cola Shut Down Plant

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 Varanasi, India - Over 1,500 villagers marched to the Coca-Cola company's bottling plant in Mehdiganj in Varanasi in India yesterday demanding that the bottling plant shut down immediately.

Breaking a police barrier that attempted to keep the protesters 300 meters from the bottling plant, the villagers held a rally at the plant's gate accusing the company of creating severe water shortages in the area and polluting the water and land.

The march and rally against Coca-Cola in Mehdiganj is the latest in a series of protests against the company in India where communities have accused Coca-Cola bottling plants for exacerbating the water crises through heavy extraction of water from the groundwater resource and polluting the groundwater and soil.

The march and rally against Coca-Cola was preceded by a two-day conference in Mehdiganj on Right to Water. At the conference, Mr. Ghanshyam, a representative of the Uttar Pradesh State Pollution Control Board admitted that the Coca-Cola bottling plant in Mehdiganj did not have a current hazardous waste authorization from the Pollution Control Board required to operate. The authorization had expired on July 27, 2007 and the Pollution Control Board has sent a legal notice to Coca-Cola in this regard.

"Coca-Cola has been operating illegally for the last 8 months and the Pollution Control Board and the state government must take immediate steps to shut down the bottling plant," said Nandlal Master of Lok Samiti, the primary organizer of the conference and protest.

Coca-Cola's bottling plants in India generate hazardous waste and they have to obtain authorizations from the Pollution Control Board to ensure that the hazardous waste is handled as required by the Hazardous Waste (Management & Handling) Rules 1989.

 March to Coca-Cola Plant in Mehdiganj Photo: India Resource Center
The communities' claims of declining water tables (which Coca-Cola refutes) have also been confirmed by the latest data from the Ground Water Board, a government of India agency.

Data collected by the Ground Water Board confirm that ground water levels have dropped up to 8 meters (26 feet) in the first seven years of Coca-Cola's operations, from 1999 to 2006.

The result has been the drying up of wells and hand water pumps in the vicinity of Coca-

Cola's bottling plants, and continues to pose a significant crisis for farmers who also rely on the ground water resource to meet their needs. Over 80% of the community in Mehdiganj engage in agriculture, and groundwater remains the primary source of water for the community to meet all its water needs.

"The Coca-Cola company is a gross violator of human rights in India by continuing to operate its plants in areas where the community is unable to meet its basic water needs. Do we need to satisfy Coca-Cola's thirst for water when even the farmers don't have enough water to make a living?" said Amit Srivastava of the India Resource Center, an international campaigning organization. "All of Coca-Cola's claims of being a socially responsible corporation ring hollow when weighed against its track record in India."

The Coca-Cola company in India is under fire from various communities who have accused the company of creating severe water shortages and pollution. The Coca-Cola company was forced to agree to an assessment of its plants in India as a result of a sustained campaign internationally. The assessment of six plants (out of fifty Coca-Cola plants) released in January 2008 was conducted by the Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) and was a scathing indictment of Coca-Cola's operations in India.



March to Coca-Cola Plant in Mehdiganj Photo: India Resource Center
The assessment, which was paid for by the Coca-Cola company, has recommended the closure of another bottling plant in India-in Kala Dera, Rajasthan-because of the acute water situation. The assessment also warned Coca-Cola on Mehdiganj, noting that the water tables have been depleting and the aquifer is moving towards a semi-critical situation.

"Coca-Cola, Pepsico and other companies are plundering our natural resources. Water sustains life, and without water, life is not sustainable. The time has come to put an end to the misguided expropriation of our natural resources and assert the right to water to the communities to whom it belongs," said Medha Patkar of the National Alliance of People's Movements, who led the march and rally.

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