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The Violence of Development

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"Ethnic cleansing" -- the forcible dislocation of a large number of people belonging to particular ethnic groups -- is an outlawed practice. Individuals who are accused of ethnic cleansing are subjected to indictment by international criminal tribunals, and even domestic courts are increasingly used in the West to prosecute those who commit mass violence abroad.

Yet most large forced dislocations of people do not occur in conditions of armed conflict or genocide but in routine, everyday evictions to make way for development projects. A recent report by the World Commission on Dams estimates that 40 million to 80 million people have been physically displaced by dams worldwide, a disproportionate number of them being indigenous peoples. Indeed, this "development cleansing" may well constitute ethnic cleansing in disguise, as the people dislocated so often turn out to be from minority ethnic and racial communities.

In the Philippines, almost all the large dam schemes are on the land of the country's 6 million to 7 million indigenous people. In India, 40 percent to 50 percent of those displaced by development projects -- a total estimated at more than 33 million since 1947 -- are tribal people, who account for just 8 percent of the country's 1 billion population.

Still, international human rights monitors remain oblivious to the violence of development. A biased focus on international criminal justice -- the pursuit of a Milosevic, for example -- has blinded the world's conscience to mass crimes that are often as serious as those that occurred in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.

The millions of people forcibly dislocated from their lands are usually from among the poorest and most vulnerable sections of populations. Upon dislocation, these communities are pushed into further poverty and violence. These conditions are themselves grave human rights violations, but they also lead to further violations -- for example, by exacerbating conflicts between large communities that lose land and are resettled and the communities into which they move.

Forcible dislocation destroys the livelihoods of entire communities as large dams and inappropriate agricultural projects alter the land-use patterns that traditionally support farming, grazing and fishing. And the number of people

forcibly dislocated is probably far larger than reported, as the displaced are systematically undercounted -- for example, by as much as 47 percent in the case of the projects funded by the World Bank. In China's Western Poverty Reduction Project in Quinghua, the World Bank Complaints Panel found that entire towns of thousands of Tibetan and Mongol minorities were not counted as affected.

The United Nations has declared mass eviction to be a violation of the human right to housing. And because of growing conflicts over water and natural resources, the World Commission on Dams was established in 1998 by the World Bank, the International Conservation Union and others. But despite these efforts, human rights violations continue in the name of development.

For instance, a judgment by the Indian Supreme Court in October 2000 will allow the construction of a mega-dam on the Narmada River to go forward. This is deeply disappointing given the Indian judiciary's history as the protector of the rights of the underprivileged. It is also tragic because the project will lead to the displacement of more than 200,000 people and the elimination of the rich ecological resources in the Narmada Valley, one of India's most fertile.

The Narmada Valley dam project is the second largest in the world, after the Three Gorges dam project in China, which is known for its excessive human and environmental costs. The World Bank, which originally was to have funded the Narmada project, withdrew funding in 1993 after being criticized for violating its own internal regulations on resettlement and rehabilitation and environmental clearance. Every funder since then -- Japanese and Germans included -- has withdrawn after running into criticism, and the project is now being funded by Indian state governments, redirecting scarce funds from much-needed health and education projects.

A broad coalition opposing the dam, consisting of the people of the Narmada Valley as well as domestic and foreign intellectuals, social activists, journalists, judges and lawyers, has repeatedly pointed out technological alternatives for producing power and providing water, but these have been dismissed by the Indian Supreme Court.

On the other side is the developmental nationalism displayed by Indian Home Minister L. K. Advani, who says opponents of such projects are working at the behest of "foreign nations" -- a response commonly given by governments that commit gross human rights abuses.

It is clear that international indifference toward the violence of development projects needs to end.

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