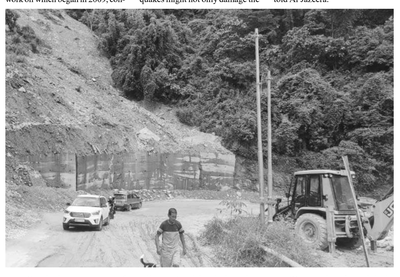
Concerns as India builds rail network in remote state near China

Kolkata, India – India's ambitious railway project to connect a small northeastern Indian state along its border with China to the rest of the country is raising concerns among local forest dwellers and environmentalists.

The 45km (28-mile) project, work on which began in 2009, connects Sevoke in eastern state of West Bengal to Rangpo in the Himalayan state of Sikkim, with three more stations between them, one of them underground.



Apart from bringing Sikkim onto India's railway map, the project is being touted as an engineering marvel with its network of 14 tunnels and 17 bridges in a single broad-gauge rail line. Most of the railway project lies in West Bengal, with only 3.44km (2 miles) in Sikkim.

The government claims the project, once completed, will bring more income for local communities and boost tourism in the Himalayan region.

The project also aims to extend the railroad to Nathu La in Sikkim, on the India-China border, to facilitate troop movement in case of an emergency.

But environmentalists fear the railway project could threaten thousands of lives in the ecologically fragile Darjeeling Sikkim Himalayan (DSH) region that is prone to landslides, earthquakes and other natural calamities.

"The area lies in seismic zone IV and V which is highly vulnerable to earthquakes and such huge construction activities enhances the possibility of a catastrophic disaster," Jatishwar Bharati, a geographical researcher based in West Bengal, told Al Jazeera.

"The rock formations are too young as the zone is formed with Phillitic Daling group rocks that do not have strong bonding. The zone is still building up and hence very unstable. Even minor vibrations can disturb their alignment leading to severe landslides and flash floods with mudflow during monsoon."

Bharati referred to an accident at the project site last month when the rock inside one of the tunnels caved in during blasting, killing two workers and injuring five others.

"Natural calamities like earthquakes might not only damage the railway network but the loose layer of rocks as an indirect effect of construction activities and heavy vehicular movement can bring greater destruction to the livelihoods of people and biodiversity in the area."

Former officials of the Geological Survey of India (GSI) conceded that the area is prone to landslides.

"The Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayas has a reported history of landslides… But any major engineering project like this must have considered and taken into account all those factors," retired GSI Deputy Director Niraj Kumar Sarkar told Al Jazeera.

"Construction of tunnels in the Himalayas itself is a challenging job due to complex geological, geomorphologic and hydrological factors. But technology ensures safe construction," he said.

Sarkar said the authorities should "initiate some hydrological studies to dispel the fear of the locals regarding drying of natural streams during the construction of the tunnels".

Activists say hydropower dams over the Teesta, a transboundary river flowing close to the railway project, has already made the area vulnerable to natural disasters.

"The Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) report and the related Environmental Management Plans (EMP) for two hydropower dams on Teesta had admitted that the hillsides around the project site were geologically fragile and any tampering with the slopes might result in severe landslides, increase danger of siltation in the reservoir, and affect the National Highway 31," Soumitra Ghosh, environmental and forest rights activist, told Al Jazeera.

"We are already witnessing caving of roads in areas where dams have been built and the river water flooding the highway and turning people homeless."

On July 8, heavy monsoon rains led to landslides in the Kalimpong and Darjeeling areas of West Bengal, with the Kalimpong site just 3km away from the railway project.

In fact, the water level of the Teesta River crossed the danger mark this year and flooded, inundating roads and leaving hundreds of families homeless.

The flooded area is less than 10km (6 miles) from the proposed railway line. But it is not just dams that accelerate natural disasters, according to environmentalists deforestation and urbanisation do the same.

Pakistan's Balochistan provice faces food emergency for 500,000 people: UN

Pakistan's Balochistan province, battered by a harsh winter, a locust invasion, COVID-19, and drought-like conditions, faces a food emergency for about 500,000 people, UN humanitarians said on Tuesday.

"An estimated 500,000 people are facing crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity while another 100,000 people require immediate life-saving assistance. The dry spell and reduced water availability are destroying crops and threatening the survival of livestock which are the main livelihood and food source for many families in the affected areas," the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said.

Meteorologists forecast drought-like conditions through the end of the year for southwestern Balochistan, bordering Iran and Afghanistan.

"Low rainfall during October 2020 to May 2021 has created severe drought-like conditions in parts of Balochistan province with six of the 12 central and southern districts being severely affected.

It is forecasted that drought-like conditions will continue in the affected districts until the end of the year, while Balochistan is still recovering from compound disasters that have affected the province in recent years, including a harsh winter, locust infestation and the COVID-19 pandemic," it added.

Assessments are underway as provincial disaster management authorities, the United Nations and food security sector partners support livelihood projects in some of the affected districts, OCHA said.

The Humanitarian Response Plan for Pakistan hopes to help 4.3 million people out of 11 million people in need, the office said, but that 332 million US dollar plan is just 18 per cent funded.

Can Turkmenistan become a serious gas player in Europe?

The Caspian Sea is one of the world's largest and oldest oil and gas producing regions. During the Cold War, the hydrocarbon-rich area was Soviet-controlled as the vast majority of the reserves were located in the Soviet Union. Since the breakup of the communist state, international companies have flocked to the newly independent countries such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Of the littoral states, Turkmenistan has by far the largest reserves when it comes to natural gas. Geographic isolation and animosity with Azerbaijan long prevented the export of gas to customers in Europe.

Recently, however, relations between Ashgabat (Turkmenistan) and Baku (Azerbaijan) have improved as the countries signed an agreement to jointly develop a shared natural gas field. While the size of the field isn't a game-changer, the renewed cooperation between the countries could be. Turkmenistan has the world's fourth-largest gas reserves at 19.5 trillion cubic meters and 10 percent of the global total. It includes Galkynysh with 2.8 trillion cubic meters which is one of the world's largest gas fields.

The geographic isolation of Turkmenistan as a landlocked nation is the most important impediment to large-scale exports. That changed somewhat with the ascendance of the Chinese economy and the massive demand for raw materials and energy. Chinese companies imported 43 bcm in 2019 from Turkmenistan which is 80 percent of the total exports that year. While the contracts are kept secret, analysts assume that Ashgabat is still heavily indebted to China for the construction of the Central Asia-China Gas pipeline (CACG). Therefore, Turkmenistan is adamant about diversifying towards Europe.

The recent conclusion of the $40 billion Southern Gas Corridor, which consists of the pipelines TANAP and TAP, from Azerbaijan to southern Europe also underlines the opportunity for Turkmenistan. For the first time in decades, the export of natural gas from Central Asia to Europe directly is a viable option if the involved states play their cards well.

The TANAP and TAP pipelines are designed to transport 10 bcm to Europe and 6 bcm to the Turkish market from Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz field. Currently, the pipelines operate only at half of their capacity and could also be upgraded. Only a trans-Caspian pipeline needs to be constructed for gas to flow from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan. Therefore, modest exports are possible relatively quickly from a technical point of view.

The first step towards a major deal could be announced in August after the summit in Turkmenistan's Awaza seaside resort that will be attended by Turkey and Azerbaijan. The presence of Turkish President Erdogan can be a sign of a breakthrough on the production side. The problem, however, is more likely to be found on the demand side. The European market is already well connected to producers through pipelines and LNG import facilities. Furthermore, gas from Turkmenistan will head to southeastern Europe where Russia has aggressively built new pipelines to discourage competitors. It could be too little too late for the export of Central Asian gas to the European market. Although there is some capacity in the TANAP and TAP pipelines to include gas from Turkmenistan, a multi-billion investment in a trans-Caspian subsea pipeline is required. The European Investment Bank won't finance fossil fuel projects from the end of 2021 anymore.

Dahal for accommodating leaders close to Nepal

CPN-Maoist Centre Chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal today told party's standing committee members that he was in favour of inducting lawmakers from the Madhav Kumar Nepal-Jhalanath Khanal faction of the CPN-UML into the Sher Bahadur Deuba government.

According to CPN-MC Standing Committee member Ganesh Shah, Dahal hoped that lawmakers from the Nepal-Khanal faction of the UML would join the government. According to a standing committee member, Dahal told the standing committee meeting that efforts were on to include UML leaders from the Nepal-Khanal faction into the CPN-MC.

Another CPN-MC standing committee member Lilamani Pokharel said UML lawmakers from the Nepal-Khanal faction had played a crucial role in saving the constitution and the House of Representatives. "The best way to recognise their contribution is to ensure their participation in the government," Pokharel said. Meanwhile, both the factions of the UML -- one led by Oli and the other by Nepal-Khanal -- are trying to reconcile their differences and keep party unity intact.

Uzbekistan taps into its primary health workforce to expand hepatitis testing and treatment

A pilot project in Uzbekistan has demonstrated that trained and empowered primary health care professionals help increase testing and improve management of chronic viral hepatitis.

The project, which is in line with WHO recommendations on providing care close to people's homes and in their communities, improved access to hepatitis services by strengthening primary health care. It serves as an example, showing how countries can act on viral hepatitis.

Hepatitis B and C virus infections are highly prevalent in Uzbekistan, and are a priority in the Ministry of Health's agenda. In 2016, an estimated 2.5 million people were living with hepatitis B and 1.3 million with hepatitis C infection in the country.

In December 2019, the Center for Disease Analysis Foundation (CDAF) launched a 1-year pilot programme in the capital city Tashkent, in partnership with Uzbekistan's Research Institute of Virology and Ministry of Health. The pilot allowed general practitioners to carry out testing and treatment at the primary health care level, resulting in patients gaining access to free testing and affordable treatment.

Twelve polyclinics were recruited as part of the pilot project. Nurses participating in the programme were trained on the use of rapid diagnostic tests, motivational interviewing and patient registration. Doctors were trained on the interpretation of laboratory results and treatment and management of uncomplicated cases of chronic hepatitis B and C. After the assessment by family doctors, patients without serious complications were enrolled in treatment in primary care settings, and those with advanced liver disease were referred to specialist care at the Research Institute of Virology.

"A month before the project launch, experts from the Research Institute of Virology, the CDAF and the University of Maryland trained general practitioners, equipping us with knowledge and technical skills, and introducing us to the latest information on the treatment of viral hepatitis," explained Dr Sevara Nizamova, a 41-year-old general practitioner from Tashkent, who has now provided hepatitis testing and treatment for 4 months.

Dr Nizamova, further explained that the pilot project has acted as a catalyst in increasing the literacy of the population about viral hepatitis and encouraging them to seek testing and treatment. By the end of the project, results demonstrated the willingness of people to also invite family members to undergo testing for viral hepatitis.

Around 62 000 people were tested for hepatitis B and C infections in Tashkent, over a period of 7 months. The programme had initially set a target of testing 250 000 adults but had to be suspended temporarily due to the sudden outbreak of COVID-19. Activities resumed in September 2020, after appropriate measures were introduced for the prevention of virus transmission.

Of the many patients who benefited from the pilot project, one offered this testimony: "As my family physician offered free testing, I got tested and learned that I was infected with the virus. Under my doctor's guidance, I can count on a full recovery in due course. The project also benefited my family budget because the diagnostics was free of charge, and the medications were affordable".

Excelerate energy supplies Bangladesh with medical equipment to combat COVID-19

A U.S.-based LNG company, today announced a joint donation with fellow members of the U.S.-Bangladesh Business Council (the Council) to provide medical supplies to aid in Bangladesh's fight against COVID-19. The Council partnered with nonprofit organization Project C.U.R.E., the world's largest distributor of donated medical equipment and supplies to resource-limited communities across the globe.

Council members Chevron, HSBC, and MetLife joined Excelerate to deliver 46,000 KN-95 masks; 13,000 N-95 masks; 80 transformers; 60 oxygen concentrators; and 20 ventilators.

"We have a responsibility to our employees and customers in Bangladesh," said Steven Kobos, President and CEO of Excelerate. "The Council is a key partner of ours and together we joined forces with Project C.U.R.E. to make a direct impact. Through our donation, these medical supplies will provide much needed relief and support to severely affected people in Bangladesh." The shipment arrived at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka on July 26. U.S. Embassy Chargé d'Affaires JoAnne Wagner participated in a handover ceremony with senior representatives of the Government of Bangladesh. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and Bangladesh's Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) will distribute the donated equipment and supplies to 10 medical colleges across Bangladesh. "The COVID-19 pandemic has produced unprecedented challenges for the global health community, from large urban hospitals to small rural clinics. Project C.U.R.E. has been on the front lines to meet those challenges with our partners to combat COVID-19 all over the world, including Bangladesh," said Dr. Douglas Jackson, President and CEO of Project C.U.R.E.