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Subject: 1750 MW Demwe Lower project: Direct and indirect impact on habitat of Eastern Hoolock Gibbon needs careful consideration

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6th March 2018

Dr. Harsha Vardhan,

Chairman,

Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife.

Sub: 1750 MW Demwe Lower project: Direct and indirect impact on habitat of Eastern Hoolock Gibbon needs careful consideration

Dr. Harsh Vardhanji,

Namaste! I am a wildlife biologist from Northeast India and the primary focus of my work is primates. I am writing to you in the context of the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife re-examining the 1750 MW Demwe Lower project for wildlife clearance as per a directive of the Hon'ble National Green Tribunal.

Majority of the members of the earlier Standing Committee in 2011 have already rejected the Demwe Lower project at the current site and endorsed the report of Dr. Asad Rahmani, former Director, Bombay Natural History Society. I understand that the judgement of the Hon'ble NGT requires that your committee also take into consideration the opinion of the majority of the members of the erstwhile Standing Committee while reconsidering the project. Dr. Rahmani's report gives a detailed assessment of various issues and key species being impacted, arriving at compelling reasons to reject the Demwe Lower project at the present site. I fully endorse the findings of this report as a wildlife biologist working in the Northeastern region for over two decades.

I would further like to bring to the notice of the current Standing Committee the need to be additionally concerned about the impacts on critical species such as the Eastern Hoolock Gibbon (*Hoolock leuconedys*). In this respect I would like to bring to the notice of the Standing Committee that I was part of an official team constituted by Government of Arunachal Pradesh which inspected the 132 KV power transmission line from Namsai to Tezu to Roing for its impact on the Eastern Hoolock Gibbon habitat during its forest clearance process. We had recommended increasing the height of the power line by 25 metres to allow movement of the gibbons in the upper canopy. As members of the site visit committee to the Demwe Lower site would have noticed, this power line passes through forest land both overlapping with and contiguous with some of the forest land being acquired for the Demwe Lower project (e.g. Kandey Community forest). This makes it apparent that the Demwe Lower project too, directly and indirectly, impacts habitat of the Eastern Hoolock Gibbon.

Members of the NBWL SC and site visit team will be aware that small pockets of eastern Assam (Sadiya) and Eastern Arunachal Pradesh are the only places in India that the Eastern Hoolock Gibbon (*Hoolock leuconedys*) is found.

While the powerline had comparatively lesser impacts which could be mitigated to some extent (by extending height), construction of such a major hydropower project at this particular location is

likely to seriously impact wildlife habitat directly and indirectly, including that of the Eastern Hoolock Gibbon.

The large chunk of land which will be acquired on the left bank of the river downstream of the Parshuram Kund bridge which will house construction facility, permanent colony, muck dumping and quarry areas etc. will involve felling a large amount of trees. This area also touches the road from Parshuram Kund towards Namsai which has very less traffic movement currently. But that is likely to change very substantively once construction on this project starts. Thus, in addition to the direct loss of wildlife habitat (including that of the Eastern Hoolock Gibbon) and the serious downstream impacts, the construction activities of this mega project will also cause major disturbance over a long period of time. Despite the claims that construction phase is 'temporary' and that a project like 1750 MW Demwe lower will be built over five years (61 months), the actual experience of building large hydropower projects in the fragile environment of the Northeast tells another story. For example, the 600 MW Kameng hydroelectric project likely to be commissioned this year is already under construction for over 13 years! This has a great toll on the wildlife of the area, especially if coming up at such a sensitive location.

The amount of rock and overburden which will be excavated from the fragile mountains and river-bed around Parshuram Kund for the Demwe Lower project is very significant - more than 23 lakh truck loads. Even if one subtracts the material to be re-used for dam etc., the amount of muck to be rehabilitated is 111.17 lakh cubic metres as per the official figure. If we take a truck of volume 6 cubic metres, this translates to over 18.5 lakh truck trips to dispose off only rock and over-burden to the muck disposal sites. In addition to this there will be movement of large quantities of cement, steel etc. to the site for construction. All in all this will result in heavy direct and indirect disturbance to the wildlife of the area, much magnified compared to the current traffic disturbance.

I just wanted to highlight another additional aspect which may not have been considered by the Standing Committee of the NBWL until now. Hope the Standing Committee takes a precautionary approach to ensure that the ecologically and culturally rich sites of the Northeast are saved for the future while arriving at a decision.

Yours sincerely,

Dilip Chetry

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