

Items No. 01 & 02

**BEFORE THE NATIONAL GREEN TRIBUNAL
PRINCIPAL BENCH, NEW DELHI
(Through Video Conferencing)**

Original Application No. 43/2020/EZ

And

Original Application No. 44/2020/EZ

Bonani Kakkar

Applicant(s)

Versus

Oil India Limited & Ors.

Respondent(s)

And

Wild Life and Environment
Conservation Organisation

Applicant(s)

Versus

Union of India Board & Ors.

Respondent(s)

Date of hearing: 24.06.2020

**CORAM: HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE S. P. WANGDI, JUDICIAL MEMBER
HON'BLE MR. SIDDHANTA DAS, EXPERT MEMBER**

For Applicant(s): Mr. Siddhartha Mitra, Senior Advocate
along with Ms. Shruti Agarwal, Advocate
in Item No. 1.
Mr. Priyadarshi Chaitanyashil, Ms. Ranu
Purohit, and Mr. Sant Rakshit Manu,
Advocates in Item No. 2.

ORDER

1. Case taken up by video conference on *Vidyo App*.

2. These cases are taken up together as identical questions have been raised. The Applicant in O.A. No. 43/2020/EZ, an environmentalist, who has preferred the application alleging failure of the Respondent Authorities in preventing the blowout of Baghjan 5 oil well of the Respondent No. 1, M/s. Oil India Ltd. (OIL in short), resulting in a massive fire causing irreparable loss to the entire biodiversity of the region and loss of lives and property.
3. It is stated that on 27.05.2020 at around 10:30 AM the producing well of Baghjan 5 under the Baghjan Oilfield of OIL in Tinsukia District, Assam, released natural gas in an uncontrolled manner. Baghjan is one of the 23 oil wells set up by OIL to tap the large gas reserves in the Brahmaputra basin located near the Eco Sensitive Zone (ESZ) of the Dibru-Saikhowa National Park. The released gas is stated to be a mix of propane, methane, propylene and other gases that flow with the wind the condensate of which mostly falls on the bamboo groves, tea gardens, banana trees and betel nut trees in the area and also spread into the Dibru-Saikhowa National Park which, according to the Applicant, records over 40 mammals, 500 species of birds, 104 fish species, 105 butterfly species and 680 types of plants,

including a wide variety of rare orchids. It harbours the tiger, elephant, wild buffalo, leopard, hoolock gibbon, capped langur, slow loris, Gangetic dolphin, besides critically endangered bird species such as the Bengal Florican, White Winged Duck, Greater Adjutant stork, White rumped vulture, slender billed vulture as well as the rare and endemic Black-breasted parrotbill.

4. The Dibru Saikhowa National Park and Biosphere Reserve is stated to lie at a point where rivers Siang, Dibang and Lohit meet to form the river Brahmaputra and is a mosaic of wetlands, swamps, grasslands and forests and hosts several critically endangered bird species and endangered Gangetic Dolphin. Gangetic river dolphins, India's national aquatic animal, have reportedly died due to the gas blow-out and many other endangered species of flora and fauna destroyed.

5. It is further stated that oil has spilled into the Dibru river causing a film of oil in the river that passes through the Maguri-Motapung wetlands, an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area, and along the Dibru Saikhowa National Park. The Maguri-Motapung Wetland, located less than 10 km from Dibru-Saikhowa National Park, is a part of the

Dibru-Saikhowa Biosphere Reserve (DSBR) and hosts some of the most vulnerable species of birds such as Swamp Francolin, Marsh Babbler, Greater Adjutant and Pallas's Fish-eagle, Red-headed Vulture and White-bellied Heron, and over 80 species of fish. River Dibru is a tributary of River Lohit which then forms river Brahmaputra in the lower reaches. Brahmaputra river system is also a home to Gangetic dolphins.

6. It is stated that enormous volume of inflammable natural gas was being released from the Baghjan-5 well since 27.05.2020 which caught fire on 09.06.2020 claiming lives of two fire-fighters. The blow-out has left behind huge volumes of residue as gas condensate which is a mixture of chemical compounds that are toxic for land and vegetation and is a known carcinogen. The blowout is not only hazardous to the health of the people but also severely affect their livelihood whose occupation is mainly agriculture, fishing and animal rearing.

7. The Applicant further contends that due to negligence and lapses on the part of the Respondent No. 1, OIL, the community as well as the biodiversity of the entire Dibru-

Saikhowa Biosphere Reserve is under threat of irreparable damage.

8. The Applicant in O.A. No. 44/2020/EZ, a NGO dedicated to community awareness in the Upper Assam region has raised the same questions as the one raised in the O.A. No. 43/2020/EZ. It is stated that due to the fire that broke-out in the oil well of OIL, apart from causing enormous destruction and damage to the ecology, there has also been loss of property and human life and wildlife. The fire is stated to be still raging causing severe threat to the local population and the flora and fauna of the ecologically fragile region. Almost 1785 people of Baghjan village under Hapjan Block, Tinsukia District, Assam are stated to be witnesses to the incident that resulted in evacuation of 800 families from the site of the well and nearby region on 30.05.2020. Due to the negligence and lack of concrete effort on the part of the Respondent No. 1 to control the spread of the oil and gas leak, enormous fire broke-out in the area on 09.06.2020 which continuous to rage causing displacement of more than 1600 families. The applicant strongly invokes the precautionary principle and the Polluters Pay Principle under Section 20 of the NG Act, 2010 as well as the "Public Trust" doctrine.

9. During the course of his argument, the Ld. Senior Counsel for the applicant in O.A. No. 43/2020/EZ has referred to a newspaper report published in www.hindustantimes.com on 11/06/2020 titled *“Put new gas wells on hold until OIL has a disaster plan: Wildlife Institute”*, according to which the toxic fumes and oil coating have universally affected the area’s flora and fauna. The contaminants and oil are continuing to be released in the surrounding areas requiring immediate steps to contain the spill over. The released toxins are known to have long-term persistence in soils and sediments, due to percolation which will not only affect the current life conditions but, due to sustained release, pose a serious health risk for a longer-term. It was contended that the place of incident is merely 500 metres away from Motapung beel and Dibru-Saikhowa National Park.

10. Further, the OIL did not have a mitigation plan for such disaster although the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife had recommended that the OIL provide a legal undertaking about their environmental safeguards and to specify the nature and extent of their liability in case of accidents involving oil spillage/gas leakage into the Maguri-

Motapung wetland. A comprehensive impact assessment was also suggested in respect of the OIL field operations in the biodiversity-rich Dibru-Saikhowa National Park and that further explorations in the area should be initiated only after a thorough investigation of potential impact and after evaluating disaster handling capabilities in place with appropriate technology and trained manpower.

11. It appears that a comprehensive study had been undertaken by the Wild Life Institute of India (WII) post the blow out as per newspaper, report published in www.hindustantimes.com on June 11, 2020, referred to earlier a copy of which filed along with OA 43/2020. The report of the WII indubitably holds the OIL culpable for the incident.

12. We have heard the learned Counsel for the Applicants and we are satisfied that the cases involve substantial questions relating to environment that calls for consideration by the Tribunal under Sections 14 and 15 of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) Act, 2010.

13. Issue notice returnable in 30 days.

14. Applicants to furnish requisite within 03 days without fail.

15. Keeping in view the entire facts and circumstances set out in the applications and upon consideration of the documents filed therewith as well as the oral submission of the learned Counsel for the Applicants, we are of the view that in order to proceed further in the matter effectively, it would be expedient, in the meantime, to constitute a Committee of Experts to look into the matter on the initial terms of reference which shall be set out below. The Committee shall comprise of the following:-

- 1 Hon'ble Mr. Justice B.P. : Chairman
Katakey, former Judge of the
Gauhati High Court.
- 2 Member Secretary, Central : Member
Pollution Control Board
(Online, if travel is restricted
due to Covid-19)
- 3 A senior expert from Council of : Member
Scientific and Industrial
Research (CSIR)
(Online, if travel is restricted
due to Covid-19)
- 4 Dr. Sarbeswar Kalita, Professor : Member
and Head of the Department of
Environment Science,
Guwahati University
- 5 Shri. Abhay Kumar Johari, IFS : Member
(retired), Former Member
Biodiversity Board

- 6 Shri Ajit Hazarika, Ex-Chairman, ONGCL : Member
- 7 Member Secretary/Senior Scientist, Assam State Pollution Control Board
- 8 District Magistrate, Tinsukia District, Assam : Member

The Committee shall be at liberty to co-opt as member or seek opinion from any other expert/ experts or institution/institutions including Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Dehradun, if felt necessary.

The Member Secretary, CPCB shall be the nodal agency for coordination.

The State PCB and the District Magistrate, Tinsukia District, Assam shall provide all logistic support including personal protection equipment (PPE) in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic and security to the members of the Committee.

16. The initial expenditure for the functioning of the Committee shall be borne by the State of Assam which may be reimbursed after the liability for the damage is assessed.
17. The Committee shall visit and inspect the site and the area in question and examine on the following aspects:-

- i. Cause of gas and oil leak;
- ii. Extent of loss and damage caused to human life, wildlife, environment;
- iii. Damage and health hazard caused to the public;
- iv. Whether any contamination has been caused to water, air and soil of the area of the oil well and its vicinity;
- v. Extent of contamination of water of the Dibru river due to the oil spill;
- vi. For the purpose of (iv) and (v) above, it may be necessary to get the air quality monitored and, samples of soil and ground water of the area as well as the water of river Dibru downstream of the oil spill tested;
- vii. Impact on the eco sensitive zone of the Dibru-Saikhowa National Park and Maguri-Motapung Wetland;
- viii. Impact on agriculture, Fishery and domestic animals in the area;
- ix. Whether there were any mitigation measure put in place by OIL to offset the incidents such as the one in question;

- x. Persons responsible for the fire incidents and the cause of failure to prevent the incident;
- xi. Assessment of compensation for the victims and cost of restitution of the damage caused to property and the environment;
- xii. Preventive and remedial measures;
- xiii. Any other incidental or allied issues.

18. While dealing with the above questions, the Committee may also dwell on the action taken thus far either by the Government or by the OIL or by any other agency and the expenditure incurred towards mitigation. Opportunity may also be provided to the Respondent OIL to give its views and submissions.

19. The Committee shall submit its preliminary report to the Registry by e-mail at judicial-ngt@gov.in as expeditiously as possible not later than 30 days from hence.

20. In view of the prevalent situation caused by the pandemic, the Applicant may also furnish copies of the applications and its annexures along with a copy of this order to each of the Members of the Committee forthwith by e-mail.

21. In view of the *prima facie* case made out against OIL on the extent of damage caused to the environment and biodiversity, damage to both human and wildlife, public health and, having regard to the financial worth of the Company and the extent of damage, we direct the OIL to deposit an initial amount of ₹25 Crores with the District Magistrate, Tinsukia District, Assam and shall abide by further orders of the Tribunal.

22. Let copies of this order be sent to Hon'ble Mr. Justice B.P. Katakey, former Judge of the Gauhati High Court and other Members of the Committee facilitate early and convenient transaction of the matter. A copy of this order be also transmitted forthwith to the Chief Secretary, Government of Assam, who shall ensure compliance of the directions by all concerned Departments and Government agencies in the State.

23. List for further consideration on 29.07.2020.

S.P. Wangdi, JM

Siddhanta Das, EM

24th June, 2020

O.A. No. 43/2020/EZ & O.A. 44/2020/EZ

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