

India's Uranium Boss Says Deformed Children May Be 'Imported'

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Bloomberg News

July 24, 2014 – Confronted with reports villages near Uranium Corp. of India Ltd.'s mines have unusually high numbers of physically deformed people, Chairman Diwakar Acharya said: "I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of those guys are imported from elsewhere, ok?"

A Bloomberg News report on July 9 highlighted the struggles of the locals with disease and early deaths – and the suspicion they shared with some environmental activists that the health conditions are linked to mining waste.

Acharya dismissed as biased any findings of a correlation between the mines and deformities in nearby villages. Activists and doctors come with an agenda to Jadugora, a town of about 19,500 people in eastern Jharkhand state that's home to the company's main operations, he said in a July 14 interview.

"See, what happens is, you say you are a specialist and you'll come and treat," Acharya said at Uranium Corp.'s headquarters. "But all you do is, you are convinced UCIL is evil and you have come here only with the sole motive of finding reasons which would validate your preconceived notions."



The Uranium Corp. of India Ltd. facility stands in Jadugora
Photographer: Manjunath Kiran/AFP/Getty Images

Uranium Corp. sends its security officers to monitor attempts by outsiders to examine villagers, Acharya said, explaining it was a necessary step for collecting information about alleged health problems. He was skeptical when told Bloomberg reporters had met a dozen families stricken by deformities, and in particular reviewed the medical records of four children and interviewed their doctors.

"Maybe," Acharya said. "Your word, my word."

'Healthier Environment'

Company-backed surveys show that compared with outlying areas, "there's no change in disease pattern around Jadugora," said Acharya, 57, who started at the company as a

mine manager in 1988. “If at all, it is better because of the healthier environment here.”

Photographs in an Indian newspaper of deformed children in the villages around Jadugora led the Jharkhand High Court in February to demand an explanation from Uranium Corp. and government agencies. The High Court wrote in its order “the health problems related to uranium mining are affecting the indigenous people disproportionately in and around the uranium mining operational area,” with as many as 50,000 people at risk. Children living near the mines are “born with swollen heads, blood disorders and skeletal distortions,” it said.

Ananda Sen, the lawyer appointed by the court to review the case, said he’s considering asking a judicial panel led by the state’s chief justice to order an independent inquiry. First, he needs to “study some more on the health aspect and all these things,” he said in a July 14 interview.

False Impression

Regarding his theory that disabled people had been brought into the local area to create a false impression, Acharya provided no explanation for why impoverished villagers, many of whom subsist mainly on rice gruel and show signs of malnutrition, would help carry out such a deception.

Uranium Corp.’s tailing ponds, dumpsites containing mildly radioactive waste pumped out of the mines, stretch across 193 acres (78 hectares). The company says the waste is treated to remove contaminants. Some water from the ponds empties into the River Gara, which flows past surrounding villages and is used daily by locals to fish and bathe.

Amitabh Kaushal, who oversees health and family welfare services of the area holding the

uranium mines as deputy commissioner for East Singhbhum district, said in May he thought an investigation was warranted. He has since declined to discuss the matter, refusing to be interviewed when approached at his office on July 14.

Opposite View

A 2007 study carried out by a group called Indian Doctors for Peace and Development examined 4,022 households and reached a conclusion that was the opposite of Uranium Corp.’s: the closer a family lived to the mines, the more likely it was to report having someone suffer from congenital malformation. The doctors’ group is an affiliate of the Nobel Prize-winning, Massachusetts- based International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.

Neither that study nor any other has established evidence of radiation poisoning in the area. Still, a 2008 analysis of the area’s water highlighted another possibility: The presence of heavy metals.

Samples analyzed then by the Centre for Science and Environment, a New Delhi-based environmental research and advocacy group that maintains its own laboratory, found drinking water with mercury levels 200 percent above Indian government limits at the time. Well water in another spot contained lead that was more than 600 percent over the limit, the Centre found. Lead is a byproduct of uranium mining, mercury is not.

Toxic Water

Water collected by a Bloomberg reporter in June from a stream leading out of the tailing pond area contained uranium levels 33 percent

higher than World Health Organization drinking water guidelines. While local people don't consume water directly from the creek, the flow may make its way into local wells.

Pinaki Roy, a spokesman for Uranium Corp., said he didn't know of any reports about heavy metals in the area. He declined to elaborate.

Health or environmental concerns aside, India plans to increase nuclear power generation capacity 13-fold to 62,000 megawatts by 2032. Nuclear energy, which is fueled by uranium, accounted for 3.5 percent of the nation's electricity generation last year, Jitendra Singh, an official in India's prime minister's office, said in a written reply to questions in parliament on July 16.

Local Fuel

Of the nation's 20 nuclear reactors currently in commercial operation half are eligible to use imported uranium under International Atomic Energy Agency rules, Singh said. The 10 others use locally produced fuel, he said.

"Energy security based on clean and reliable sources is essential for India's future," Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Twitter after meeting government nuclear scientists in Mumbai on July 21. "Nuclear energy has a key role in India's energy strategy."

On the morning of July 13, in the village of Tilitand outside Jadugora, a group of doctors from Kolkata had set up a medical clinic at a schoolhouse. Villagers queued up at rickety desks and scuffed wooden tables on the school building's porch.

Many weren't sure of their ages; they negotiated guesses with the volunteers taking their information. One 35-year-old woman blamed the

deaths of two family members on a witch, according to her survey form. Of 108 patients, 35 reported having skin diseases, organizers said.

Wind and Dust

The village sits adjacent to one of the tailing ponds. On windy days, dust from the pond area settles on people and on open pails of drinking water, said Govind Hansda, a farmer who lives next to the school. Dust is unrelated to the reported health problems, Uranium Corp.'s Roy said.

"The thing is that in this area their sanitary habits are suspect," he said.

A white truck marked "ON SECURITY DUTY GOVT. OF INDIA" and bearing the initials for state-owned Uranium Corp., UCIL, pulled up within minutes of the clinic's opening. A security officer who introduced himself as Khetra Mohan Majhi emerged, opened a green notebook and asked the doctors for their names.

"We just want to know who is here," he said.

Later, a man with a green camouflage ball cap pulled low over his forehead positioned himself next to where villagers were giving their names to a volunteer. The man cupped a small piece of paper in his hand and, looking over the volunteer's shoulder, took down each detail. He ran away when he saw a reporter pointing a camera in his direction, jogging around the corner and pedaling off on a bicycle.

Secret Guard

Interviewed later, he first said he was a member of the group that helped organize the clinic, Jharkhandi Organization Against Radiation. After being told by a reporter that none of the organizers knew him, he said he was Gurcharan

Munda, 24, a security guard for Uranium Corp. Munda said he was ordered by one of his supervisors to gather the clinic participants' names.

The security presence wasn't meant to deter attendance at the clinic, Acharya said, adding he doesn't condone his employees operating "stealthily."

"Not intimidation – no, no, no – we want to know what is happening around here," he said.

The documentation the company submitted to the Jharkhand High Court focused on community-level studies, not individual cases. In the past five years or so there have been "five or six or seven children" whose cases were featured in media reports, said Roy, the company spokesman.

Ordinary Problems

The company had them checked by doctors, who found they were suffering from a range of ordinary medical problems and malnutrition, he said. As for health problems linked to the

company's operations, Roy said, "there hasn't been a single detected case, per se."

"Supposing tomorrow, somebody turns up and says – X, Y, Z – these four guys have deformities because of radiation –we'll go to them," Acharya said. "We have done, in each such case in the past. We have sent a medical team, a radiation expert – they have gone, found out, measured the radiation level around their individual houses, tried to conclude what is the disease and why. We'll do that again."

In every case, Acharya said, Uranium Corp. has been vindicated.

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