

Press Release

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ADB ANNUAL MEETING IGNORES ACCOUNTABILITY GAP Asian Bank does not act upon human rights violations in Sri Lankan highway project

Colombo, 10th May 2004- ADB's annual meeting, which will start on the 15th May at the remote Jeju island of South Korea, will not see the traditional presence of global civil society. A boycott was called for in protest of the Bank's lack of accountability and unwillingness to learn from past mistakes.

Non-governmental organizations in Sri Lanka denounce the Bank's actions in their country.

"ADB has no accountability to the people and their inspection mechanism does not help to overcome mismanagement and corruption" said Hemantha Withanage of the Sri Lankan Centre for Environmental Justice.

Unsolved controversies about the Asian Development Bank-funded Southern Expressway are a case in point. Recently, in February 2004, the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka found that the human rights of people whose lands are to be taken to make way for the Expressway had been violated. The Court also found that the National Environmental Acts requirements had not been complied with.

While ADB's own inspection panel, for technical reasons, rejected ten complaints sent in 2002 by affected people, the Supreme Court decision confirms that the project has indeed violated ADB's own policies. These include policies on environmental and social impact assessments, public participation in decision making and involuntary resettlement.

"The ADB should respect the Supreme Court decision and take measures to correct the problems." Said Mr Withanage. "The ADB should implement its environmental and resettlement policies and mitigate the impacts, while insisting on the respective authorities to comply with the monitoring plan."

The ADB has a long history of financing controversial projects and programs throughout Asia, supporting corrupt governments and rich corporate elites rather than the poor. Travelling to this week's ADB meetings on the Korean island of Jeju is extremely expensive, making civil society participation effectively impossible.

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Note for journalists:

Background on the Southern Expressway in Sri Lanka

In 1992 the RDA decided to build a highway from Colombo to Matara to facilitate the development of the Southern region, referred to as the Southern Expressway. The RDA design was reviewed by consultants of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 1998 and a trace was agreed.

ADB and JBIC agreed to fund the project. The required EIA and social impact studies were done, and in 1999 permission was granted to carry out the project. But later, a completely new trace was drawn, for which no EIA was done, nor was any Social Impact Analysis carried out. The Expressway was moved away from the traffic sources so that it is no longer viable. Five temples are now to be damaged and access to hospitals is made much more difficult. In the 18 km Gelanigama deviation homes to be destroyed increased from 40 to 267. In the 30 km Akmeemana deviation losses increased from 51 to 476.

The people to be affected were not consulted; they were merely informed. When they did, they made appeals, which were not heeded. Gelanigama and Akmeemana affected householders took the matter up with the Human Rights Commission but got no redress. In March 2002 they went to the Court of Appeal. The court appointed a Judicial Committee, of three retired Supreme Court Judges, chaired by a highly respected former Chief Justice to report on the issue. The Judicial Committee found that Human Rights had been violated and that new environmental studies should be done. But no action was taken.