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Tension grips Mundra village over proposed power plant

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Ahmedabad The situation at Bhadreshwar village in Mundra taluka of Kutch district remains tense after 30 fishermen were arrested by the local police on charges of rioting a few days ago. The issue concerns the persistent protest by the local fishermen against the proposed 300 MW thermal power plant by OPG Power Plant at the village. The locals fear the proposed plant will harm the environment in the area and will lead to the loss of livelihood for nearly 20,000 fishermen, salt-pan workers, pastoralists and farmers in Bhadreshwar, Luni, Hatdi, Pavdiara, Sangad and other neighbouring villages.

They allege that the OPG has made several attempts to start the construction work since July this year, even before obtaining the mandatory environment clearance. The attempt by the company on August 23 led to clashes between the private security guards hired by the company and the local fishing community. C M Jadeja, Sub-Inspector, Coastal police station, Mundra, said, "The fishermen were arrested under various sections of the Indian Penal Code and have been sent to the district jail after their two-day police remand got over." Kaushik Ayachi, president, Bhadreshwar Salt Association, confirmed the fishermen's contention and said, "The OPG has increased its activities on the proposed site especially in August, leading to escalation in the situation. The district administration has done nothing to resolve the issue." Earlier, the public hearing conducted by the Gujarat Pollution Control Board (GPCB) for environment clearance of the proposed project on May 29 had witnessed strong opposition by the affected community. Earlier, Ayachi had told Newsline, "Nearly 4,000 acres of salt pans in the area within 10 km radius of the proposed power plant, affecting at least 1,500 families, will become unsuitable for pursuing our traditional livelihood."

J D Kalyani, Regional Officer, Kutch, GPCB, said, "The proposed plant has not yet received the environment clearance." Asked about the allegations that the company has started work at the proposed site, Kalyani said, "The situation is so tense there that I can't send my men to verify the claims. They too may end up being beaten up."

Kutch District Collector R R Varsani blamed both the parties for the tense situation. "I have no role to play in this. Though the district administration has not checked it firsthand, but I have read in the local newspapers that the company officials have started soil testing at the proposed site, which in my opinion they shouldn't have done. Similarly, the local fishing community must not take the law into their own hands. Both the parties are responsible for precipitation in the situation," he said.