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SAVE THE RIVER INDUS: ACTIVISTS GATHERED IN LONDON AND LOS ANGELES

JOINED THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY IN CELEBRATING 14th MARCH – THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF ACTION FOR RIVERS

Pictures Available at http://www.nrg.to/jeay_sindh/jsqm_pictures/wsc_london.htm

Responding to calls by the International Rivers Network (IRN) and Friends of the River Indus (FOTRI), World Sindhi Congress (WSC) commemorated the International Day of Action for Rivers on Monday, 14 March 2005, with two events in London, UK and Los Angeles, CA, USA. These events were organized to raise awareness about the River Indus, one of the largest rivers in the world, which flows through the provinces of Pakistan.

Sindh, currently a province of Pakistan, has long been the victim of Islamabad's gross injustice and the plunder of her natural resources, including water and public lands. Sindh contributes 67% of the total revenue of Pakistan, yet the province still suffers from underdevelopment and high unemployment rates.

One of the biggest issues facing Sindh and other small provinces in Pakistan is the Pakistani government's firm determination to build big anti-humanitarian and anti-environmental dams, such as the Greater Thal Canal and the Kalabagh Dam, on the upper riparian of the Indus River. These dams will have a disastrous impact on the economy and ecology of Sindh, Balouchistan, and Pakhtunkhwa, three of Pakistan's four provinces. The only province poised to benefit from the dams is the Punjab. The provincial legislatures of the three negatively affected provinces have passed resolutions against the Kalabagh Dam, and the Sindh Assembly has passed two resolutions against the Greater Thal Canal, but Pakistan's military refuses to acknowledge these protests.

In London, WSC staged a peaceful protest rally at Parliament Square in Central London, in front of the UK Parliament House of Commons. This rally was organized to seek the support of the UK administration and public in encouraging the Pakistani government to stop the construction of harmful mega-dam projects.

The rally was attended by Sindhis from throughout the UK and by other supporters of healthy rivers. The protesters held banners and raised slogans condemning Pakistan's anti-environmental policies, the persecution and killing of Sindhi and Baloch activists, its military dictatorship, and the development of nuclear weapons.

“More than 90% of 40 million Sindhi people are dependent on the Indus River,” said Ms Suraiya Makhdoom, the UK and European Organizer of WSC. “The survival of the Sindhi people, and with them the survival of hundreds of species of birds and mammals, is now endangered. Pakistan has built several mega-dams and barrages upstream that have impeded the flow of the Indus River and its tributaries to Sindh.”

Other speakers at the event were Dr Haleem Bhatti and Ms. Hafeezan Talpur of World Sindhi Congress and Mr. Kadir Jatoti of the World Sindhi Institute. All the speakers demanded international support in resolving this issue, urging nations that provide Pakistan with economic and moral assistance to defend human rights conditions in the country and ensure that any assistance given is used for the benefit of all regions and peoples in Pakistan, and not selected areas or certain ethnic groups.

After the speeches, the protesters marched peacefully around Parliament Square carrying banners, chanting slogans, and distributing leaflets.

In Los Angeles, WSC hosted a seminar entitled "Indus River Water Mismanagement Crisis." Speakers included Saghir Shaikh, Chairman of WSC, Hassan Mujtaba, an exiled freelance journalist who writes for the international press, including the BBC, and Mr Irshad Kazi of the Sindhi Association of North America.

Quoting from the speech of Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan Nobel Laureate for Peace in 2004, Dr Shaikh said, "Recognizing that sustainable development, democracy, and peace are indivisible is an idea whose time has come." In his multi-media presentation he highlighted the findings of the World Commission on Dams regarding the fallacies of the mega dam construction.

"We are proud to be part of the global community celebrating 14th March as an International Day of Action against Dams, and for Rivers," Shaikh said.

In his paper entitled "Saga of Indus: Past, Present and Future," Mr Mujtaba said, "Nations celebrate their rivers, yet many of them worship them ... Sindhis have a special connection with the River Indus." He continued, "There would be defeat of peaceful and secular civilization in South Asia if Sindhis lost their non-violent and legal fight for their fair rights of water over the Indus." Mr Kazi presented a summary of technical, political, and historical arguments against the construction of the Kalabagh Dam and Greater Thal Canal.

Participants in the seminar passed the following resolutions unanimously:

- * As mega-dams are very damaging to the ecology and destructive to the livelihood of people downstream, we urge international institutions not to finance any effort to build Kalabagh Dam or any other large dams in Pakistan.
- * We demand that Pakistan impose water conservation measures, including replacing water intensive cash crops with more suitable food crops, requiring drip irrigation, lining the canals, banning private lawns, and plugging leaks in water supply lines, so that the natural flow of water can be restored without depriving people of their livelihoods.
- * We demand an end to anti-environmental activities such as dumping sewage and industrial waste into Indus and its tributaries. We demand pro-active steps, such as the construction of fish ladders to restore Palo fish and barrage bypasses for the Indus dolphins, to give animals of the Indus free reign within their natural habitats.
- * Since the Tarbela and Mangla Dams have drastically reduced the flow of silt into Sindh, accelerating its desertification by preventing topsoil replenishment, we demand that the Pakistan government convene international experts to recommend the best approach for restoring the flow of silt, including dismantling the dams if necessary.
- * We reject all water treaties imposed by Pakistan on Sindh and demand the institution of a process that will restore the status quo ante of water distribution that existed prior to the creation of Pakistan.
- * Until the existing mega-dams are decommissioned, we demand that the Pakistani government ensure an adequate supply of water to replenish the forests of Sindh, fill its natural and historic lakes, and provide a continuous supply to the delta.

* We demand that all water disputes between Sindh and Pakistan be resolved through the International Courts, because we cannot rely upon the institutions in military-governed and Punjab-dominated Pakistan to ensure fairness.

In addition to WSC, numerous other organizations, mainly Jeay Sindh Quomi Mahaz, Jeay Sindh Mahaz, Awami Tahreek, Pakistan Network for Rivers, Dams and People, Sindh National Council, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, and World Sindhi Institute joined the calls of IRN and Friends of the River Indus by arranging a variety of programs, including prayer for the River Indus, seminars, protests, and rallies in various parts of Sindh.

About the World Sindhi Congress (WSC): WSC is a UK, USA, and Canada based human rights advocacy organization. The main objective of WSC is to foster awareness within the international community about the persecution of Sindhis in Pakistan and about the Sindhi people's struggles for their human rights, including the right to self-determination. WSC is a registered company in England and Wales, and Louisiana, USA, organized to carry out non-profit activities only. For more information, visit <http://www.worldsindhicongress.org> .

About the International Rivers Network (IRN): IRN is an environmental, economic, and social activist organization that supports local communities working to protect their rivers and watersheds. IRN works to halt destructive river development projects, to encourage equitable and sustainable methods of meeting needs for water, energy and flood management, and to develop a worldwide understanding of the importance of rivers and their essential place in the struggle for environmental integrity, social justice, and human rights. For more information, visit <http://www.irn.org/>.

About the International Day of Action for Rivers: 14 March 2005 marked the eighth annual International Day of Action for Rivers. Last year, thousands of people from around the world took action to protect living rivers and protest projects that would harm them. They marched to dam sites, held river blessing ceremonies, organized conferences and photo exhibits, and participated in hunger strikes. This year, events were planned around the world to continue to increase global awareness of river and watershed issues, and to celebrate successful efforts of river protection. For more information, visit <http://www.irn.org/dayofaction>, or email dayofaction@irn.org.