

Banglar Manabdhikar Suraksha Mancha (MASUM) organised a civil society interface with Mr. Léo Heller, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation; during his visit at Kolkata on 5 th November 2017. A good number of civil society representatives attended the interface. Mr. Heller was with his associates from UN Human Rights Council. Mr. Binayak Sen, Mr. Samar Bagchi, Mr. Meher Engineer and Mr. Sujit Choudhury were the prominent among the participants. MASUM along with other six representatives from CSOs and concerned individuals made submission before the UN SR. Mr. Kirity Roy; Vice President of MASUM presided over the session. Mr. Biplab Mukherjee for MASUM, Mr. Arun Kanti Biswas, Mr. Bibarton Bhattacharya, and Mr. M.N Mukherjee from Nagarik Mancha and Mr. Sasanka Sekhar Dev from DISHA made submissions. Affected persons from 24 Parganas (North) and Cooch Behar made testimonies and Ms. Samata Biswas facilitated their testimonies and translated the same for the UN SR.



The meeting was inaugurated by Mr. Kirity Roy of MASUM who asked the gathering to introduce themselves, and also extended his welcome to the representatives from UNHCR (names). He also explained that although MASUM is not a specialist in issues of water and sanitation, in the areas where it has been working for decades, it has noticed how closely human rights violations are also connected with right to water and clean sanitation. It is from this perspective that MASUM sought to organise this meeting.



available information.

**Mr. Leo Heller-** United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the Human rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation was the next to speak. He wanted to explain his role in the proceedings, as well as the kind of meetings he has been participating in, All over the world, in enquiring about sanitation, the perspective of the government always differs form that of the civil society organisations, however, nowhere is the disparity as stark as in India. He also informed the gathering of his future plans in India and stressed that they would like to collate and collect all



**Mr. Biplab Mukherjee** - Secretary, Banglar Manabdhikar Suraksha Mancha, submitted a written presentation to the UNSR, based on MASUM's work in Chhitmahal (erstwhile enclaves) and in the case of river erosion in Murshidabad. He pointed at the lack of access to sanitation caused by displacement.



Mr. TilakBala Barman - District Human Rights Monitor, MASUM, spoke about the situation of erstwhile Indian enclave dwellers who are now in camps. She spoke about the lack of toilets in the camps, the lack of drinking water (since there is a high iron content in the water procured from deep tube wells) and how the benefits to be accrued from the national and state level missions always get appropriated by the local level bodies.



Mr. Mohar Ali Mondal - District Human Rights Monitor, MASUM spoke on behalf of arsenic affected Mr. Pradip Paul. He informed the UNSR about the prevalence of arsenic contamination in North 24 Parganas . Mr. Pradip Paul's brother and mother both died from complications arising from long exposure from arsenic contamination; Mr. Paul himself had to have extensive, expensive medical treatment, and his body continues to be marked with sores. People of the area continue to drink arsenic contaminated water

since there is simply no alternative. The government has been appraised of this situation, but to no avail.



Ms. Sumi Barman, MASUM volunteer from the Mathabhanga area of Coochbehar district spoke on behalf of two former enclave dwellers, Ms. Sishubala Barman and Ms. Marjina Bibi (residents of Nalgram and Falnapur erstwhile enclaves) at Cooch Bihar. They provided concrete examples of toilets and water reservoirs meant for the enclave/ camps being constructed on mainland India territory; not in the area of erstwhile enclaves (since the allotment for enclaves and camps are routed through local gram panchayats)

and then the camp dwellers being denied access to them.



Mr. M.N Mukherjee of Nagarik Mancha informed the gathering about the reasons behind ground water pollution, the different kinds of pollution (arsenic, fluoride, nitrate, iron, chloride) and the need to tackle it urgently.



Mr. Naren Ghatak of Jalmitra (Friend of water), submitted a written document to the UNSR about the work that they had conducted in the Sermapore municipal area, and they pointed at the misuse of water, even in conditions where water supply wasn't inadequate. Taps, especially municipal taps are always left open, homes had illegal deep tube wells, here were several illegal water leaking jet plants etc. sanitary waste and cow dung gets dumped very close to water sources, there by leading to contamination in water.



Mr. Sasanka Dev of DISHA, spoke about the condition of solid waste workers (unorganised), their abysmal living and working

conditions, in spite of the crucial task of segregation and recycling that they carry out.



Mr. Sujit Chowdhury spoke of the work that they had done in the western part of West Bengal, where the water level is not at all deep, due to the undulating nature of the plains. In the areas where they carried out their study, there are only pit toilets (constructed after 2010), and no running water supply. He also pointed at the fact that construction of toilets is not wholly subsidised by the government schemes, and that there is no coherent drinking water policy of the government of India.



Mr. Binayak Sen; Vice President of PUCL spoke about the State and multinational sponsored initiatives whereby local resources (such as water) gets taken away from indigenous communities and given away to corporate. A case in point would be the large Jindal steel plant in Chhatisgarh, where even after being allotted huge quantities of water by the government, the factories use ground water as well, thereby removing access to common property resources of indigenous people and further endangering their lives.



Mr. Samar Bagchi recounted their work at Malda, where each family has had to shift from one bank of the river to the other, at least 5 or 6 times, due to large scale erosion. This constant erosion and resultant movement makes people lose access to drinking water and to sanitation.

Ms. Samata Biswas pointed at the lack of access to sanitation in urban spaces, for trans-people and the limited periods of time during which pavement dwellers can access sanitation, through public utilities.

For his ending remarks, Mr. Leo Heller; UN SR thanked the gathering and commented on some of the salient topics that emerged from the discussion: a) the quality of drinking water, b) access to clean sanitation, c) patterns of discrimination that are exacerbated by the local bodies, and according to gender, location and privilege, c) the failure of national missions to deliver on their promises.

