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## Gorai mangroves threatened

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**Mumbai, Feb. 29:** The special nomic zone (SEZ) which Essel Infra Projects private limited, owned by business tycoon Subhash Chandra Goyal, had planned to set up in Gorai on the outskirts of Mumbai is still facing stiff opposition from the Dharavi Bet Bachao Samiti. The SEZ is seen by the locals as the means of destruction to their livelihood and more significantly to the ecology which sustains life on the Dharavi Island.

After the agitation staged by the Dharavi Bet Bachao Samiti on February 17, Mr Goyal in a statement had said that the company has offered to withdraw from the project. However the locals are sceptical. "Since twenty years we have been fighting for the cause of the island. Considering the past experience of Essel World set up in Gorai village we cannot trust the promises made by the owner of the Essel Infra Projects," said the president of the samiti, Mr Joseph Gonsalves.

In a response to a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed by the Bombay Environment Action Group (BEAG), the Mumbai high court in its judgement said that, "There shall be total freeze on the destruction and cutting of mangroves in the entire State of Maharashtra." However, a stay order from the Supreme court was acquired by the company on the judgement.

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acre of land near the Gorai village to prevent sea water from entering into the mangrove region. This is killing the mangroves and is posing a danger to the local environment," Mr Gonsalves added.

While countering the allegations, the senior vice-president for corporate affairs of the company, Mr Nilesh Mistry, said, "The land is owned by the company and the embankment is in existence since 100 years and was built by then British administration to reclaim the land."

"In the last two years our company has planted more than one lakh mangroves around Essel World and Water Kingdom," he added. "The SEZ at the island would be non polluting and for entertaining purpose and is not related to any industrial manufacturing," said Mr Mistry. "The company's proposal to negotiate with the locals has fall on

deaf ears," he added.

The Dharavi island is spread over the 5700 hectares of green land on the outskirts of the city. A total population of one and half lakh resides in ten villages on the island. The three villages in the jurisdiction of BMC are Manori, Gorai and Culum.

On February 27, Mr Gonsalves discussed the issue with the chairman of SEZ approval committee Mr Pillai. Mr Gonsalves stated that the project can greatly harm the mangroves apart from disturbing the economy of the island. Annually Rs 40 crore of revenue is earned by the state government from the fishing business on the island, he added.

Around 15 out of 35 species of true mangroves found in India have been identified along the shoreline of the city. By trapping silt, mangroves maintain the integrity of Mumbai's shoreline. This is a vital service to the city as it is very prone to erosion, having been built on reclaimed land that is battered by the sea on all three sides. The flood during the monsoon in July 2005 in Mumbai showed the consequence of tampering with fragile ecosystems like mangroves.

Mangroves can be found largely in the Thane creek, Mahim, Versova, Gorai and Ghodbunder with sporadic patches in places such as Bandra, Malabar hill and Colaba. The city has lost almost 40 per cent of its mangroves in the past decade mainly because of reclamation for housing, sewage treatment etc.