

In the salt deserts bordering Pakistan, India builds its largest renewable energy project

By Sibi Arasu
The Associated Press

KHAVDA, India — Rising from the bare expanse of the large salt desert that separates India from Pakistan is what will likely be the world’s largest renewable energy project when completed three years from now.

The solar and wind energy project will be so big that it will be visible from space, according to developers of what is called the Khavda renewable energy park, named after the village nearest to the project site.

At the site, thousands of laborers install pillars on which solar panels will be mounted. The pillars rise like perfectly aligned concrete cactuses that stretch as far as the eye can see. Other workers are building foundations for enormous wind turbines to be installed; they also are transporting construction material, building substations, and laying wires for miles.

When completed, the project will be about as large as Singapore, spreading out over 280 square miles. The Indian government estimates it will cost at least \$2.26 billion.

Shifting to renewable energy was a key issue at the COP28 climate summit. Some leaders voiced support for a target of tripling renewable energy worldwide in any final agreement while curbing the use of coal, oil, and natural gas, which spew planet-warming gasses into the atmosphere.

What makes this heavy industrial activity peculiar is that it’s taking place in the middle of the Rann of Kutch in western India’s Gujarat state. The Rann is an unforgiving salt desert and marshland at



least 43.5 miles from the nearest human habitation but just a short army truck ride away from one of the world’s most tense international borders separating the two South Asian nations.

Ground zero of India’s clean energy transition

When The Associated Press visited the renewable energy park, two days of unseasonal heavy rains had left the ground muddy and water logged since the only escape for water in this rough terrain is evaporation. This made it even harder for the workers to do their job.

Notwithstanding the tough conditions, an estimated 4,000 workers and 500 engineers have been living in makeshift camps for the better part of the past year toiling to get this project up and running.

Once completed, it will supply 30 gigawatts of renewable energy annually,

enough to power nearly 18 million Indian homes.

As India aims to install 500 gigawatts of clean energy by the end of the decade and to reach net zero emissions by 2070, the project site will likely contribute significantly to the world’s most populous country’s transition to producing energy from non-carbon spewing sources.

As things stand, India is still mostly powered by fossil fuels, especially coal, which generate more than 70% of India’s electricity. Renewable energy currently contributes about 10% of India’s electricity needs. The country is also currently the third-largest emitter of planet-warming gasses behind China and the United States.

“There are people working here from all over India,” said KSRK Verma, Khavda project head for Adani Green Energy

AMBITIOUS ENERGY PROJECT.

Employees work on a wind turbine blade at Adani New Industries Limited in the port town of Mundra in Western India’s Gujarat state. It is one of the few locations in the country where most solar energy components are made from scratch. India is developing a 30-gigawatt hybrid — wind and solar — renewable energy project on one of the largest salt deserts in the world. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool, File)

Limited, the renewable energy arm of the Adani Group, which the Indian government has contracted to build 20 gigawatts of the project. Verma, with more than 35 years of experience building dams across turbulent South Asian rivers and enormous natural gas tanks under the Bay of Bengal, says this is one of the most difficult projects he’s undertaken.

“It’s not at all (an) easy site to work at. There is no habitation, the land is marshy, there are a lot of high winds, rains, and this is a high earthquake prone area,” said Vneet Jaain, managing director of Adani Green at its headquarters in the city of Ahmedabad.

Jaain, who has overseen multiple ambitious projects for the Adani Group, said the first six months were spent just building basic infrastructure. “From April this year is when we started working on the actual project,” he added.

The Adani Group has been in the lime-light this year ever since the U.S.-based short-selling Hindenburg Research firm accused the Group and its head, Gautam Adani, of “brazen stock manipulation” and “accounting fraud.” Adani Group has called the allegations baseless.

Jaain of Adani Green says the allegations have had little impact on its ongoing projects including work at the

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