

Anti-Saranda mining chorus grows

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, Feb. 17: Two Union ministers have voiced concerns over a move by the environment ministry to allow mining by new companies in the former Maoist hotbed of Saranda that is the focus of a massive development initiative being steered by the Centre.

Last month, a forest advisory committee (FAC) of the ministry, cleared two proposals to allow diversion of 1511.13 hectare of forest land under Saranda forest division in West Singhbhum district in favour JSW Steel Limited and Jindal Steel and Power Limited (JSPL).

Now, the ministry of environment and forests (MoEF) will take a final call on whether to allow diversion of forest areas for mining activities.

According to the minutes of the meeting of January 21 and 22, the FAC cleared two proposals, one, to divert 998.7 hectare in Ankua reserve forest in Saranda in favour of JSW Steel Limited for mining of iron and manganese ore and the other to divert 512.43 hectare in favour of JSPL for mining iron ore.

But both tribal affairs minister V.K.C. Deo and rural development minister Jairam Ramesh have expressed concern over allowing mining activities in the area which was out of bounds for the administration for over 10 years and was freed from the clutches of the Maoists by security forces in 2011.

Deo argued that the rights of people over the land they have been occupying should be settled as per the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and permission of the inhabitants should be taken under Panchayati raj Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) before considering any mining proposal.

“You have to settle the rights of the inhabitants over the land under FRA. The gram sabha’s consent should be taken to on whether the land should be given for mining or not. Otherwise it is illegal,” Deo told **The Telegraph**.

Ramesh, whose ministry launched the Saranda Development Plan (SDP) to promote development in 800sqkm area comprising 56 villages, had earlier written to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh requesting him not to open up the area for mining by new players.

Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) has mining of iron ore in Saranda for the last several years.

According to sources, Ramesh has said that any proposal for mining by new players should be put on hold till the time the development plan was fully implemented and tribals felt comfortable with the local administration.

Mining only led to influx of outsiders and the local youth would never get productive employment, Jairam had said in a letter.

N.C. Saxena, a member of the Sonia Gandhi-led National Advisory Council (NAC), agreed with Deo that settlement of rights of people over land and compliance of PESA should be pre-requisites for diverting forest land.

“The FAC should have looked at the issue of settlement of rights of people and gram sabha consent. It is illegal to ignore these issues,” he said.

The minutes of the meeting do not mention anything about settlement of rights of people under FRA or PESA compliance in case of the proposals to allow diversion of forest land.

Tushar Dash, a researcher at Bhubaneswar-based Vasundhara, an NGO working for the forest rights of people, alleged that the FAC never considered PESA compliance while clearing mining projects.

FAC has four members and is headed by A.K. Srivastava, additional director general of forests, Ministry of External Affairs. No one was available for comment.