

Gram sabha nod no longer needed in road projects

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Union minister for environment and forests, Jayanthi Natarajan

In a move that will boost the UPA government's plans to expand the national highway coverage, the ministry of environment and forests (MoEF) has agreed to stop insisting on the approval of gram sabhas for the diversion of forest land for road and canal construction, or the laying of pipelines.

The MoEF had obdurately resisted the PMO's attempts to relax its policy on setting aside forest land for non-forest purposes, taking refuge behind the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 which made it mandatory for promoters of such projects to settle the rights of forest-dwellers.

These rights are recognised under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.

The ministry of tribal affairs had veered round to the PMO's views, but the MoEF continued to hold out.

In a letter issued on February 5, the MoEF issued fresh guidelines, replacing those issued August 3, 2009, in keeping with the recommendations of the inter-ministerial committee set up to look into the issue.

"The committee had inter alia recommended that a resolution of the gram sabha of the area, based on full and prior information of the project and a public hearing, endorsing that the project is in the interest of the people living on the forest land, use of which is proposed to be diverted for non-forest purposes, may not be required for projects like construction of roads, canals, laying of pipelines/optical fibres and transmission lines, etc., where linear diversion of forest land in several villages are involved, unless recognised rights of primitive tribal groups and pre-agricultural communities are being affected," the letter stated.

The move is expected to unshackle several highway construction projects.

Sources in the Ministry of road transport and highways reckon that 50 per cent of the 2012-13 target for 8,000km of highways could get kick-started in the coming weeks.

"Projects which could not get environmental clearance, and also the forest clearance, because of gram sabha veto are expected to get thumbs up," PMO sources told Mail Today.

Now, only two outstanding issues remain to be resolved between the PMO and the MoEF. These include highway widening projects and the issue of brick-kilns.