

Infra projects should not fall foul of Forest Rights Act: K.C. Deo

Infrastructure projects that come up on forest land must comply with the Forest Rights Act (FRA), Union Tribal Affairs Minister Kishore Chandra Deo has said.

No land in a Fifth Schedule area should be handed over to any industry if it violated the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), Mr. Deo said, responding to a query whether he agreed with Environment and Forests Minister Jayanthi Natarajan's opposition to the proposed National Investment Board (NIB) that hopes to fast-forward clearances for large infrastructure projects.

Mr. Deo said that as the draft Cabinet note on NIB had not been sent to him, there was no question of him responding to it.

"But I am not against any proposal that facilitates fresh investment as long as the FRA and the PESA are not violated," he said adding that he had written to Ms. Natarajan a year ago, saying as much.

No infrastructure project was delayed "because of interference by my ministry." If he heard of any violation of these two key laws, he would raise them as it was his duty to do so. Indeed, most delays took place owing to non-compliance of FRA, Mr. Deo said.

The Tribal Affairs Ministry is the nodal ministry for the FRA and the Panchayat Affairs Ministry — which Mr. Deo also heads — is the nodal ministry for PESA.

The FRA, as Mr. Deo stressed, was one of the key legislations passed by the UPA government and in the last session of Parliament, fresh guidelines were issued to the Act.

Meanwhile, Ms. Natarajan's letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has kicked up a storm in the party. It was expected that the NIB would come up before the Cabinet on Thursday. However, government sources said it was not listed on the agenda.

The Congress chose not to respond directly to what has all the appearances of a turf war. On Wednesday, its spokesperson Renuka Chowdhury chose to downplay the matter when asked a question on the subject.

"There is no tussle. This is a democratic process; we are not invited individually to come and talk in a Cabinet meeting. The agenda is always circulated and all Ministers are expected to express their opinion on any change or reform that we bring about in the Cabinet, which is a collective decision in policy making," she said.