

Linear projects clear roadblock

In a major step that could finally break the logjam over forest and environmental clearances to linear projects, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs has agreed to sort out issues coming in the way of implementing these projects, as far as requirements under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) are concerned.

Tribal Affairs Minister V Kishore Chandra Deo told The Indian Express that his ministry would support these projects, considering the need for roads and railways in tribal areas.

"Even tribals want roads and trains in their areas — it is, in fact, one of their demands. We are all for such linear projects and agree they are required. Only, affected people should be paid compensation much like compensation is paid in other areas where linear projects go," Deo said.

Under FRA guidelines, the consent of the gram sabha — backed by a resolution and public hearing endorsing the project — is necessary for projects traversing forest land. The National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) and other agencies have been complaining that for linear projects, this requirement means that scores of gram sabhas have to be involved, prolonging the process.

The tribal affairs ministry is learnt to have come around to the view that a more streamlined process involving district authorities may be considered for linear projects — a recommendation made by a PMO panel in December 2012.

The PMO has been meeting with the ministries of Environment & Forests and Tribal Affairs to expedite projects stuck in green clearances. While the demand for easing norms for linear projects — building roads or laying railway tracks, power lines or optical fibres — has been there for some time, the situation escalated after NHAI took the environment ministry to the Supreme Court last month over delays in clearing road projects.

While hurdles arising out of the Forest Conservation Act have been addressed largely following the environment ministry's January 7 guidelines facilitating phased processing of linear projects, those related to FRA have been pending.

At a meeting on December 12, 2012, the PMO had asked both ministries to issue fresh directions to facilitate "unconditional forest clearance", waiving the requirement for the gram sabha's consent for linear projects, small public utility projects and projects that do not "substantially" affect quality of life of people.

While agreeing that linear projects must go ahead, Deo opposed dilution of the FRA for all other kinds of projects, including mining. He also insisted that the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution be kept in mind when forest clearance is accorded to any project.

"All I am saying is that observe the FRA in letter and not in breach. I have no problem with mining or any other project as long as it is within the framework of established rules and the constitution. There is simply no question of diluting or overriding the FRA, and at least I will not agree to any such idea," Deo said.