

NGO urges gov to stall forest bill

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SHILLONG: The Meghalaya People's Environment Rights Forum has urged governor Ranjit Shekhar Mooshahary to withhold granting assent to the Meghalaya Forest Regulation (Amendment) Bill, 2012, passed on the last day of the recently concluded winter session of the state assembly.

The bill was passed after amending the Meghalaya Forest Regulation (Application and Amendment) Act, 1973.

"The primary objective of amending the bill was to redefine 'forest'. The sudden urgency to redefine forest without taking public opinion and maintaining optimal transparency is obviously not intended at enhancing conservation and increasing forest cover, but to provide a licence to deforest with impunity. The amendment is unique in the sense that it shall now take hundreds of hectares outside the purview of forest with the sole motive of diverting such forest for non-forestry purpose, mainly mining," a memorandum submitted to the governor said.

"This is probably the first time in the history of our country where a forest amendment is proposed not to preserve, but annihilate whatever little forest cover remains in Meghalaya today. This amendment of redefining shall have serious long term implications on rural economy and prove catastrophic for majority of the indigenous tribal population of the state, whose lives are dependent on forests," the forum contended.

The forum appealed to Mooshahary to send the bill back to the state government for a detailed deliberation on the issue, including educating opinion of both technical and legal experts, conservationists and the general public before finally deciding in favor or against the amendment.

The NGO alleged that the amendment was only aimed at benefitting a "few individuals and regularizing the large-scale violation of the Forest Act, 1980" for illegal mining activities in forest land.

"Meghalaya Forest (Amendment) Bill, 2012, which redefines forest in Meghalaya is a retrogressive step aimed at destroying the remaining forest cover of the state to facilitate and provide easy access and licence to deforest at will. This act shall render majority of the actual forest areas into non-forest areas and consequently bring them outside the purview of Forest Act, 1980," the memo read.

"No other state in NE has gone for such redefining process," it added. "This act shall be disastrous for the common indigenous tribal population of Meghalaya, whose life is intricately linked with forests for centuries. This act shall alienate small individual/clan land holdings. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 shall also be adversely affected," the NGO said.