

Tribal affairs minister Deo against dilution of Forest Rights Act rules

NEW DELHI: Any dilution of the rules under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, as being contemplated at the highest levels of the government, could lead to adverse impact in the ongoing Supreme Court case on UPA's decision to cancel the bauxite mining rights for Vedanta in Odisha, tribal affairs minister [Kishore Chandra Deo](#) has warned.

Deo has written a second letter to environment minister Jayanthi Natarajan demanding that her ministry's order of August 2009, bringing forest clearances in line with the FRA, should be adhered to strictly and not tampered with. He said the order was necessary to follow the FRA in spirit and letter.

He also noted that withdrawing or diluting the order would jeopardize the government's case for cancelling Vedanta's mining rights in Nyamgiri Hills - a move that Rahul Gandhi had championed. The company has challenged the cancellation in the Supreme Court and the case is at an advanced stage.

Sources in the government said Deo also informed Congress president Sonia Gandhi and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of his views on the environment ministry order that has become the target of infrastructure ministries, forest officials as well as higher echelons of the government.

The order requires that development projects not be allowed to cut down forests until the rights of tribals and other traditional forest dwellers are settled. It demands a mandatory consent from the affected tribals at the gram sabha level before transferring lands for projects.

The order has been honoured more in its breach since it was passed. But now, several quarters in the government have pushed to officially dilute it or completely do away with it.

It was for violating this order, besides other facts, that then environment minister Jairam Ramesh cancelled Vedanta's mining permit in Odisha.

Deo wrote, "This order is extremely significant and I write to request you to ensure that it is upheld as it is an absolute requirement in order to ensure that takeover of forestland in this country is done in accordance with law. There are proceedings pending in the SC in regard to the proposed mine by Sterlite/Vedanta... where parties seek to argue that they can bypass, ignore or undermine the FRA. Any dilution of the above mentioned circular of 2009 will have an adverse impact on the Vedanta case which is sub-judice."