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Central team to visit Posco site

Sandeep Mishra, TNN, Jul 23, 2010, 12.24am IST

BHUBANESWAR: A committee jointly constituted by the Union ministry of environment and forest and the ministry of tribal affairs is slated to visit the area earmarked for the Posco steel plant in Jagatsinghpur district to examine the veracity of allegations of flouting of law while diverting forest land for the big-ticket FDI project.

"Though there are no Scheduled Tribes in the area identified for the Posco project, we will look into the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006, because the area has traditional forest-dwellers and going by the law the consent of the concerned gram sabha ought to be taken before any diversion of forest land takes place," informed Ashish Kothari, a member of the committee.

Kothari, along with two other committee members Arup Saikia and Ravi Chellam, would hold public consultations in Dhinkia, Gadakujanga and Nuagaon gram panchayats on Friday and Saturday, Kothari said. The committee's chairman N C Saxena, however, would not be visiting the Posco area, Kothari added.

The panel's visit assumes lot of significance for the Posco project as local villagers have alleged that gram sabha consent was not taken before the state government recommended to the Centre for diversion of forest land. As much as 2,958 acres of the originally identified 4,004 acres of land for the Rs 52,000 crore project comes under the forest category.

The Union ministry of environment and forest had in January last given its "final clearance" to the project, subject to the state government satisfying it that all the procedures under the Forest Rights Act had been followed. "We will find out whether the gram sabha's permission was taken or not before diversion of forest land and also whether the full process as laid down under the Act was followed or not," Kothari said.

The committee, which reached the state on Thursday, held a public consultation on the Forest Rights Act here and observed that compared to other states Orissa had made better progress in implementing the law for settlement of individual forest rights. But the state government had not done much when it comes to settlement of community forest rights, grant of habitat rights to primitive tribal groups, forest rights in scheduled areas and identification of critical wildlife habitat and conversion of forest villages to revenue villages, Kothari pointed out. "If the Act is properly implemented then we should think that it help tackle the Maoist problem," he added.

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