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Ministry to review forest governance in Maoist-hit areas

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NEW DELHI: IN a bid to pitch in with the ongoing efforts to tackle Maoist insurgency, the ministry of environment and forest is focusing on the forest administration in the affected states. The ministry's intervention, based on plans provided by the states, is both at the level of strengthening the forest administration as well as making it "more people friendly."

This intervention will be rolled out in 14 forest divisions in the seven Naxal affected states of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa and West Bengal. The plan includes strengthening the forest administration at the cutting edge by hiring more guards, rangers, and foresters. At the same time, there is need to provide the forest officials with better infrastructure that would improve their mobility and communication.

There exists a divide between the forest administration and the local people. As part of the aim to bridge this divide, local people would be involved in efforts at forest regeneration and conservation. This would mean generation of employment in these areas.

Another confidence building measure would be the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, the forest departments have been traditionally viewed as blocking its implementation. In recognition that there is an alienation of the local people from the forest administration, which is seen to be overbearing, the plan proposes training forest officials to view people as partners.

Those such plans to improve the forest administration have been made in the past, these failed to be anything more than paper promises due to financial underprovisioning. "We were expecting some extra financial allocation this year for this purpose (divisional plans) but that has not materialised," environment minister Jairam Ramesh wrote in his letter to home minister P Chidambaram.

However, Rs 5000 crore has been recommended as grants in aid for the forest administration by the Thirteenth Finance Commission, which is being used to fund the implementation of the divisional plans. Of the Rs 5000 crore to be disbursed over the next five years, a little more than Rs 2000 crore has been earmarked for the seven Naxal affected states.

Even as Mr Ramesh stressed on the need to "provide better infrastructure for the forest administration", he also accepted that the administration needed to be more people friendly. In his address to a workshop on Joint Forest Management, the minister called on forest officials not to view the Forest Rights Act as a threat to the preservation of forests.

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