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Jairam warns against villagers' eviction from reserves

Pioneer News Service | New Delhi

Relocation of villages from tiger reserves may henceforth have a more "humane face" with Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh warning against "forcible eviction" of villagers saying, "We will slash funds, if found so."

He, however, categorically stated that eviction has to happen from the core reserve area and there was no such choice available for the villagers to stay on if they wished.

In an interaction with local groups, from major tiger reserves across the country, and senior State forest officials at a recent workshop, Ramesh also stated that the processes under Forest Rights Act (FRA) should be followed prior to relocation.

The Ministry will issue guidelines on its various provisions to the respective forest departments for their adherence, but simultaneously, the Minister clarified that the process of relocation would not be stopped till then.

Further, the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) guidelines on relocation besides the documents on commitment/ agreement by the villagers would be translated into Hindi and local language for complete understanding of the provisions by the affected. So far, these documents were largely in English.

The Minister also agreed on more funds for setting up an independent monitoring agency to oversee the relocation process from the beginning to end. Further, the committee on relocation of villages, constituted by the NTCA, would also include social scientists and representation from local groups.

It was brought to the Minister's notice that the villagers in Simlipal, Tadoba and Ranthambore were exposed to "threats, coercion and misinformation". "The villages not willing to leave are being branded as Maoists," said locals from Simlipal.

The Minister stressed that relocation has to happen from the core tiger reserve, but it has to address the human angle. "It is bound to be a time-consuming process," he said.

The members also pointed to lapses in the implementation of the provisions of the Forest Rights' Act in certain reserve areas. "In certain States, villages are being misinformed saying that FRA is not applicable to reserve areas and are being relocated," they pointed out. Ramesh clarified that FRA rights of the villagers must be settled prior to relocation.

However, the contentious issues like whether cent percent unanimity of the Gram Sabhas (village committees) was necessary for relocation or it could be done away with a majority decision, the definition of a family, lack of clarity on threshold level of damage in core areas continues to persist. The Minister, however, directed for a study on the latter issue.

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