
NAC wants action on tribals' forest rights

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The National Advisory Council chaired by Congress president Sonia Gandhi today said the Forest Rights Act (FRA) needed strengthening and the Protection of Women against Sexual Harassment at Work Place Bill, 2010, must be extended to domestic workers.

It also discussed how to push its views on the proposed National Food Security Bill, apart from deciding to examine the working of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme.

At a meeting today after a month's gap, it prepared a set of recommendations on the FRA for discussion with the ministry of tribal affairs.

Their report said the community rights of tribals and forest dwellers were being ignored and the FRA was being reduced to a 'patta' distribution legislation. It has noted many of the rules of the Act were not being implemented.

Madhav Gadgil, convenor of the NAC's working group on tribal development, had earlier made a detailed presentation on issues pertaining to implementation of the FRA

As a first step towards preparation of the draft National Food Security Bill, an NAC working group presented a note based on the recommendations made by the body in its meeting last October. After deliberations, the Council suggested the note be supported with more analytical content. The revised note may be placed before the NAC at its next meeting later this month.

The NAC also decided to set up a working group on the Integrated Child Development Services scheme, saying it was integral to any food security initiative. N C Saxena, who made a presentation on the matter, pointed to ways to improve delivery of services under ICDS, which serves pre-school children.

The food security Bill, on which NAC had earlier given its unanimous view, has been handed by the government to a committee under C Rangarajan, the Prime Minister's economic advisory council chief, for further examination. Its recommendation to enforce states-notified legal minimum wages in the NREGS was rejected; wages were revised and notified, but delinked from minimum wages.

The Rangarajan committee report on food security, which has yet to be formally released but whose contents are generally known, was not discussed today. NAC member Jean Dreze had, in an article, openly criticised the report for striking down the NAC recommendation for increased procurement of food grain. He quoted the committee as saying that increased procurement would lead to higher prices in the market. And, said it was basic economics that increased procurement would also mean increased distribution and would not lead to any such impact.

He also expressed scepticism about the committee's recommendation to reach out to consumers of the public distribution system through 'smart' cards which can fetch them food grains from any store.

Members who attended the meeting were M S Swaminathan, Narendra Jadhav, Jean Dreze, Aruna Roy, Madhav Gadgil, Anu Aga, N C Saxena, A K Shiva Kumar, Farah Naqvi and Mirai Chatterjee.