



Posco land acquisition 'illegal'

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Paradip/Bhubaneswar : The Orissa government on Tuesday began land acquisition for the proposed Rs 51,000 crore Posco steel project in Jagathsinghpur district, even as a central team termed the process as "illegal" saying that the Forest Rights Act had been violated.

"We have begun acquiring government land in Gada Kujang Panchayat area after proper verification," Additional District Magistrate (Paradip), Saroj K Choudhury said.

Stating that the work was progressing smoothly, he said two persons, Rohit Behera and Basant Behera of Bhuyanpal village, were among first to receive cheques for Rs 1.15 lakh each for their land of over ten decimal area used for cultivation of betel vine.

The process started despite reservations expressed by the central committee of union ministries of Forest and Environment and Tribal Affairs which dubbed land acquisition without implementing the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 as illegal.

"It will be illegal to acquire land until the Forest Rights Act is implemented properly," Asish Kothari, one of the four members of the joint committee said.

"After realising that the state government violated norms under the Act, we will recommend to Union Ministry of Forest and Environment to withdraw or stay the forest clearance given to the Posco project," Kothari, told reporters.

"Under Section 7 of the Act the officials involved in land acquisition at this stage are liable to be punished," Kothari said, adding "We will favour withdrawal of forest clearance to Posco-India as in case of Vedanta's Lanjigarh project."

The central committee would submit its report to the ministry within three days, he said. The team had visited three gram panchayats, Dhinkia, Gada Kujang and Nuagaon on July 24.

Though there was no tribal inhabitant in the proposed plant site, Kothari said most villagers could be treated as "traditional forest dwellers" as they depended on forest land for a living.

"The people in the three gram panchayats were earning their livelihood since 1913 from betel cultivation and other activities on forest land," he said, adding the villagers exhibited land records claiming their rights over forest land.

Kothari rubbished allegation that the committee was taking up the cause of the anti-Posco group. "We are here to verify implementation of the Forest Right Act. The committee members have met both the groups," he said.

Posco-India which required 4,004 acre, including 2,900 acre of forest land, had obtained in-principle forest clearance in January 2010.