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Jairam's plan to review impact of FRA runs into rough weather

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NEW DELHI: In what might become an embarrassment for environment and forest minister Jairam Ramesh, his plans to review the impact of Forest Rights Act have suffered a setback with several non-official members of a committee he set up either resigning or refusing to come on board.

On February 11, Ramesh had constituted a 10-member committee to review the implementation of Forest Rights Act -- UPA's flagship 'aam aadmi' scheme in its first tenure.

The formation of the committee raised the ire of tribal activists and others. Implementation of FRA comes under the ministry of tribal affairs. In fact, the government (during UPA-1) had decided to shift the onus of the Act from the environment ministry to the tribal affairs ministry after it faced tremendous opposition from the forest lobby in the government and conservationists outside.

The Act is meant to hand back rights to traditional forest dwellers over forests that were turned into government property without recognising their rights.

The committee set up by Ramesh was packed with forest officials with only two non-official members, Harini Nagendra from ATREE, Bangalore and Ashish Kothari from Kalpvriksh, a conservation NGO.

Tribal rights activists protested against what they perceived as an attempt by the forest bureaucracy to rubbish the Act's implementation and to get back greater control over its implementation.

With groups like Campaign for Survival and Dignity -- the key tribal federation behind the FRA enactment and implementation -- vehemently opposing the committee, the two non-government members too asked for changes in the terms of reference of the panel as well as its composition.

The ministry, after remaining quiet for a month, reacted to change the terms of reference as well as the composition of the team after one of the members, Nagendra, suggested she would resign unless the committee was altered.

But that did not satisfy the tribal groups. CSD refused to come on board when offered a slot in the altered committee. Nandini Sundar, a Delhi-based sociologist, too refused to join.

CSD continued to claim that implementation of the Act was being hampered by the forest bureaucracy in the states and that the ministry had so far only played a non-constructive role in its implementation. It pointed out that the tribal affairs ministry, if at all, should be reviewing its implementation.

Realising that tribal activists were opposed to the committee, Nagendra too resigned two days ago leaving the committee and the ministry's plans in disarray.

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