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Land sop to wean tribals off Maoists - Cutoff year to be eased

CITHARA PAUL



For sake of peace: A soldier patrols the Jhitka forest near Lalgarh

New Delhi, Nov. 1: The government plans to amend the law to make more tribals eligible for forest land rights in an effort to try and win them over from the Maoists.

The move, envisaged after the Centre's decision to launch an anti-Maoist offensive, may remain largely symbolic, though, since there has been little headway in implementing the older forests right law that is to be tailored.

The suggested amendments to the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (recognition of forest rights) Act, 2005, could be tabled in the winter session of Parliament which begins next month, officials said.

The four-year-old law gives tribals exclusive rights over forest resources if they have been living in a particular jungle area — and been dependent on the forest for their livelihood — for over 75 years before December 13, 2005. The law recognises the tribals' right to cultivate forest land and the right to collect, use and dispose of minor forest produce.

Now the Centre wants to reduce the cutoff period from 75 years to 60 years in its efforts to “save the tribals from falling prey to Maoist insinuations”, a tribal affairs ministry official said.

However, officials could not say how many tribal families would benefit from the relaxation. The government has no statistics on how many are eligible for land rights, either under the 75-year cutoff or under the 60-year one.

It only has two figures. One, that the 2005 act was enacted to fulfil the “long-cherished dream of 100 million tribal people and traditional forest dwellers across the country”. Two, that till last month, only 5 lakh title deeds had been distributed across the country under the act.

Worried at the tardiness, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh wrote to the chief ministers last July asking for speedy implementation.

The Centre has now decided to call a meeting of chief ministers and state tribal affairs ministers in the first week of November to discuss the implementation of forest rights. The meeting, to be inaugurated by Singh, is likely to approve the move to amend the current law.

The Union tribal affairs ministry has asked the Maoist-affected states to furnish district-wise status reports relating to the implementation of the older act.

Bengal, which has handed out only 9,299 deeds so far, ranks among the laggard states. Kerala has issued 17 deeds, while Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, Orissa and Bihar haven't awarded a single one. Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Tripura have done the best in distributing forest land deeds.

The ministry of tribal affairs initially wanted to reduce the cutoff to 50 years, but it was blocked by the environment and forests ministry, which feared such a move would lead to mass deforestation by tribals looking to cultivate their plots.

The amended act will relax the cutoff only for tribals —who form the bulk of forest dwellers — while the 75-year cutoff will continue to apply to others who live in forests. The Centre has rejected the demands of the Left governments of Bengal and Tripura to amend the act also for non-tribals.

Non-tribal forest dwellers, those with access to non-forest land, those who have other means of livelihood, and encroachers will not benefit from the amended law.

