

# Ramesh stares at fresh environmental quandary

## Minister fine with deforestation for anti-naxal ops in Jharkhand

DP SHARAN ■ RANCHI

His transition from Union Environment Ministry to Rural Development Ministry notwithstanding, Jairam Ramesh's tryst with twisted green issues seems to have made a return.

He has strongly endorsed the proposal of indiscriminate felling of trees in Saranda forest in Jharkhand for 'carrying out anti-Naxal operations and consequent development of the area'.

During his tenure as the Environment Minister, he was embroiled in a controversy for his speech at the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in 2009 and his subsequent role in granting permission to Posco to set up the multi-billion dollar plant in Orissa and the nuclear power project at Jaitapur in Maharashtra, in clear defiance of green laws.

During his recent visit to Saranda forest on January 30, Ramesh held a joint meeting with authorities from the Jharkhand Government and the Forest department to resolve the imbroglio over the sanction of forest land for police pickets. Although he had claimed credit for disallowing mining activities in Saranda area (despite granting permission to SAIL when he was the Environment Minister), he stressed upon the need to accord forest clearance to at least 120 acres of forest land demanded by the security forces to set up 24 police pickets.

Although forest department officials are said to have been reluctant in giving permission for utilisation of forest land for non-forest purposes in light of the stringent Forest Act, Ramesh pointed out provisions that allowed local authorities to grant permission for utilising up to five acres of forest land by the State Government for developmental purposes. In fact, he went as far as issuing a directive to the forest department officials to obtain sanction from their higher authorities in this



File photo of Union Rural Development Minister Jairam Ramesh interacting with villagers in a Maoist-hit village

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regard at the earliest.

However, well-placed sources in the Forest department claimed that in contrast to the provision for granting permission for utilisation of up to five acres of forest land for non-forest activities, there was a circular of 2005 that imposed a cap of cutting down 50 saplings on an acre of forest land.

Officials said there was no clear directive from the Government about whether the relaxation in granting permission for non-forest activities over an area of up to five acres of land was in sequel to the circular of 2005 that restrained deforestation beyond the loss of fifty trees on one acre of forest land.

Incidentally, the State police have sought a wide chunk of land ranging from five acres to twelve acres to set up each of the proposed 24 police pickets in the Saranda forest. Of the 24 pickets, 23 are said to include helipads too. Sources in the State Police Headquarters believe that the proposal that included facilities of helipads in 23 police pickets required a substantial chunk of land and five acres of land

would barely cut it.

Meanwhile, spokesperson of the Jharkhand Police and IG (Provisions) RK Mallik was of the view that the forests in Jharkhand were not only providing Maoists a hiding place but implicitly ensured them a legal shield too against the arduous attempt by the security forces to intensify anti-Naxal operations in the State. He said the State police were unable to set up pickets inside the dense Saranda forests in the West Singhbhum district for want of forest clearance. The State police had proposed to develop at least 24 police pickets in Saranda forest in order to liberate the area from the influence of Maoists, Mallik added.

If past bears testimony to the fact that Ramesh stood condemned in the eyes of environmental activists for succumbing to pressure for business interests during his tenure as Environment Minister, he has enough reasons to condone the environmental violation again for salvaging his 'heroic' image by resolving the complex Naxal tangle in Jharkhand.