

# States can give forest clearances for roads in sensitive areas now

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The central government has empowered states to give forest clearances for construction of government roads in areas affected by Maoist insurgency and for construction and widening of two-lane roads by the Border Roads Organisation and other defence ministry agencies within a 100km distance from the Line of Actual Control, environment and forests minister Prakash Javadekar said on Tuesday.

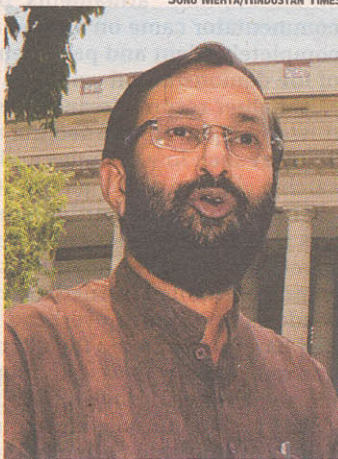
The move, in keeping with the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance government's articulated commitment to national security and federalism, also fits in with its effort to develop border states and those afflicted by Maoism.

Javadekar added that his ministry is also considering grant of approval for diversion of forest land by border states for building army stations, ammunition depots, training centres and support infrastructure such as schools, hospitals and residential quarters within 100km of the Line of Control.

Currently, the central environment ministry gives final forest clearances for all such projects after getting recommendation from the states.

"This is in the defence and strategic interest of the country. If the country is protected, then the environment will be protected," Javadekar said. He added that the Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980 was not meant to hinder projects.

The construction of around 6,000km of border roads has



**Infrastructure push:** Environment minister Prakash Javadekar.

been delayed because the states were not empowered to clear them, the minister explained.

Javadekar said that in 117 districts affected by Maoism, the respective state governments would be allowed to grant forest clearance for construction of public roads irrespective of the area of forest land involved. The only condition is that they should be outside the protected areas. As of now, state governments can do this only up to 5 hectares of forest land. States would also be allowed to give clearances for developmental projects which includes schools, among others.

States will also be able to grant forest clearance for all kinds of transmission lines; currently they can only give forest clearance for transmission lines of up to 220 kV.

"States can be given the responsibility for projects like roads, transmission lines and railways."

Javadekar was speaking at

an event to launch a web portal for online submission of forest clearances. He said that these measures were intended to bring in more transparency, efficiency and accountability in grant of regulatory clearances.

The minister had launched a portal for online submission of environment clearances on 5 June. As in the case of environment clearances, the ministry will accept hard copies of proposals for forest clearances for a month, which is the transition phase to move to online. From 15 August, the ministry will accept forest clearance proposals only through the web portal.

The online system would help the companies applying for clearance to also monitor and track what stage their proposal is at.

Sidharth Birla, president at industry lobby body Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (Ficci), said that the launch of the portal was a step towards bringing about transparency, accountability and effectiveness in the forest clearance process. "This will ensure that the process becomes time-bound and will reduce delays to critical projects. This is a step that industry has been looking forward to and is an important starting point to bring a transformational shift in government clearances. It is also a step towards enhancing the ease of doing business."

Birla added that the state approvals for strategic and Maoist affected districts demonstrate the government's serious intent in removing bottlenecks to critical projects.