

River Regulation Zone coming: Jairam

'Akshardham, CWG Village on Yamuna bank shouldn't have got nod'

Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI: Neither the Commonwealth Games Village nor the Akshardham Temple should have been allowed to be built on the banks of the Yamuna, according to Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh. He proposes to issue a River Regulation Zone notification to protect riverbeds from such harmful constructions in the future.

"The manner in which the Yamuna riverbed has been devastated by constructions should be a wake-up call to all of us," he said. "Akshardham was the first culprit, but after that we have had a series of constructions."

He insisted that he would not have cleared the mega projects on the Yamuna's banks, but admitted that little action could be taken against them now.

"I don't think the Commonwealth Games village should have got an environmental clearance, I don't think Akshardham should have got an environmental clearance, but we cannot demolish them. We have to protect the remaining riverbed."

A senior Ministry official pointed out that Akshardham never even applied for an environmental clearance, forcing Mr. Ramesh to correct himself.

It was also pointed out to him that the Adarsh Housing Society in Mumbai, at present in the eye of a storm, is facing the threat of demolition be-

cause it had never applied for an environmental clearance from the Central government.

However, Mr. Ramesh dismissed allegations of double standards, and said he did not want "to get into the past... It has already happened. What is yet to happen, we can stop that."

Both Akshardham, which got the Central government's nod during the NDA regime, and the Games Village, which was granted an environmental clearance by the first UPA government, have Supreme Court rulings in their favour.

"This is why we are working on the RRZ [River Regulation Zone] concept," said Mr. Ramesh, noting that the idea to set up a regulation on the lines of the Coastal Regulation Zone came from civil society groups. "I hope we can come out with something in the next few weeks to protect our rapidly vanishing riverbeds," he added.

New coastal norms

The Minister was speaking at the release of the Coastal Regulation Zone notification of 2011, which comes into effect from January 7, replacing the earlier CRZ notification of 1991.

He said the Ministry was

considering the demand, mostly from fishing communities, to turn the notification into an Act of Parliament, as *The Hindu* had reported last week. This could make it harder to amend the rules to provide exceptions to individual projects. "I hope we are not going to have 25 amendments to CRZ, 2011 in the next 20 years [as the 1991 notification had]. We need to get out of this syndrome of passing a law and then amending it."

However, the fresh notification itself aims to bring about "a better balance" between ecological and economic concerns, said Mr. Ramesh, adding that some economic activities had to be located in coastal areas.

"India must get used to power plants being located in coastal areas. The availability of water, import of coal or uranium fuel... will necessitate power plants being located there," he said, seeming to defend some controversial projects.

Action will continue on all identified cases of violation of CRZ, 1991, and the State coastal authorities have been asked to identify other violations of the older notification within the next four months and take action within eight months.

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