

Second airport: 'Use SEZ land rather than destroying mangroves'

Priscilla Jebaraj

NEW DELHI: Union Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh has suggested that if the State government and the Union Civil Aviation Ministry wanted Mumbai's second airport to come up at the proposed site in Navi Mumbai, they could use some of the land allotted to the SEZ which abuts the site to the south, rather than destroying mangroves on the north.

This was among the suggestions made in pursuit of a compromise solution after the Prime Minister's Office asked for a quick decision on an environmental clearance for the airport project. On September 3, the PMO sent a note to the Environment Minister, forwarding a letter from Maharashtra Chief Minister Ashok Chavan who urged a speedy clearance. Mr. Ramesh said, he replied the same day saying that "we will

find a way out, providing there is cooperation from the Civil Aviation Ministry and the State government."

The two major obstacles blocking the way to an environmental clearance are the 400 acres of mangroves that will be destroyed and the two rivers which will have to be diverted.

While land has already been acquired and allotted to the SEZ projects being developed by the Reliance and

CIDCO, Mr. Ramesh said, "if the State government is really serious, it can take back some of those thousands of hectares and use it for the airport, rather than destroying mangroves to the north."

"If they really want to, they can certainly do it," he said. "I am willing to accept their argument that no alternative site is possible...They must also give way and compromise on some of these things...I have made several

suggestions."

Another suggestion is related to the "non-essential" parts of the project be shifted to minimise the environmental damage. "What is the need for a five-star hotel at the site? What is the need for a shopping mall there?" he asked.

The developer CIDCO has been asked to come back to the clearance panel with a modified proposal.

September 13. "CIDCO has finally come off its high horse," said Mr. Ramesh. "We are now working to find a solution."

The Minister refuted the accusation that the Environment Ministry was dragging its feet on the project. "It was only on July 6, 2010 that the final [Environment Impact Assessment] report and the [Coastal Regulation Zone]

rating of displaced Palestinians