

Sal borer epidemic

Drive launched to stop tree-felling in M-P

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Jan. 13
"If a man is dying of deadly disease, his family and doctors will try to the very end to save him. But in Mahdya Pradesh, the death warrant for over 10 lakh trees has been signed because they have been afflicted by the deadly sal borer infestation and there is no one to save them," said Mr Samar Singh, secretary general of WWF-India, and Ms Pratibha Pande, environmental activist.

Both of the them have launched a campaign to stop the felling of sal trees. They have appealed to Environment Minister Saifuddin Soz and Chief Minister Digvijay Singh to seek the help of forest entomologists, agricultural experts and others before declaring the ailment incurable.

An expert committee of foresters, headed by the Chief of the Indian Council for Forestry Research and Education, Mr B. N. Gupta, was appointed in December to study the problem at the field level and report to the Ministry. However, Mr Gupta has been away in Indonesia.

The rest of the team members visited Jabalpur and other areas

from Dec. 10 and filed their report on Dec. 16.

The committee has not really looked for any freshly research approached to solving the problem, and it is feared that Mr Gupta may have merely endorsed the report.

Mr Samar Singh, who has served as Forest Secretary in M-P, has taken up cudgels for the doomed trees of the State and Mr Digvijay Singh has ordered that no more trees be cut. But the felling operations have been underway and close to 4 lakh trees have already been cut.

Despite the CM's latest order, some 20,000 to 30,000 trees are being cut every day. The reprieve that has come is only for the sal trees in national parks and sanctuaries.

A public interest litigation against the cutting of the trees has been filed in the Jabalpur High Court by a concerned citizen, but the court has not stayed the felling. With election fever mounting, the cutting of 10 lakh trees seems inevitable.

The ICFR, Dehradun, has been working on isolating kairomone, a chemical present in the sap of the sal tree, which is what attracts the borers.

From Dehli

Renewal of mining in Rajasthan likely

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Jan. 15
With five Udaipur-based companies getting Central Government permission for temporary working of their mines in forest areas, forest officials fear that mining activity may be renewed all over Rajasthan.

After the December interim order of the Supreme Court banning all activity in contravention of the 1980 Forest Conservation Act, about 1,500 mines had come to a standstill in the State. But Messers Wolkman Ltd. and four other mine owners whose lease renewal were pending with the Environment and Forest Ministry have succeeded in getting "temporary working permission" without the recommendation of the State Government.

The Ministry's letters dated Jan. 10, give temporary permission for reworking mines to five units. Waving the Ministry's clearance, the companies approached the State Government on Jan. 13, to rubber stamp what the Centre has cleared.

In fact it is because the Environment and Forest Ministry was unable to check violations of the Forest Conservation Act that people went to court and the Supreme Court through its interim order stayed all activity that was not in consonance with the Act. Now the Environment Ministry has once again blotted its book.

The mines in Rajasthan, most of them on 15 to 20 hectares, are owned by powerful politicians and bureaucrats and the Supreme Court order had left them chafing. Now taking advantage of the Centre's leniency many of them, it is feared, may approach the Ministry directly for temporary working permissions.

The Ministry has obviously taken advantage of its Nov. 25, 1994, guideline which says that temporary working permission can be granted to States for continuance of mining activity in an excavated area for a maximum period of a year after the expiry of the old lease.

For temporary renewal the agency should have submitted its proposal to the Forest Department at least a year before the expiry of its old lease and the proposal should be forwarded by the State complete in all respects.

Rajasthan has been one of the most vocal States on decentralisation of all power, particularly those over forest land vesting with the Centre. But after the Supreme Court order, the State Government — not wanting to be caught on the wrong foot — had asked all mine owners to file affidavits that they have closed shop.

Even the State mines — Rajasthan Mines and Minerals Ltd. at Udaipur and Hindustan Copper Ltd. at Khetri — have been shut. As per the court directive expert committees have been set up to identify forest areas and to ensure compliance of the court directive. But within a month of the clamp down, reworking of mines is on the cards.

Environmental clearance for Sanghi Ind project rejected

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Jan. 18

The long drawn battle of Sanghi Industries Ltd. and environmentalists has come full circle with the Environment and Forest Ministry rejecting environmental clearance to Sanghi for construction of a jetty at Khauthar in Kutch district of Gujarat.

Going by the recommendations of the Anil Agarwal Committee the Ministry has informed Gujarat High Court that the necessary clearance can be considered only after the Gujarat Government determines the carrying capacity of the region through a coastal zone management plan and installs a system of monitoring and other safeguards as suggested by experts.

Environment and Forest Minister Saifuddin Soz has taken personal interest in the case, locking horns with officers in the Ministry and making it clear that the Parliamentary Committee that went off to inspect the site and do a report had no business to do so without his permission.

In July 1996 the Ministry received a proposal from Sanghi Industries for construction of a jetty in the Kharo Creek; an approach road to the jetty from operational backup area along with conveyor for transportation of cement and clinker; laying of intake water pipeline from power plant/desalination plant for discharge of waste waters and some electric transmission lines from operational back-up area to the cement plant.

The World Wide Fund for Nature had also filed a writ petition in the Gujarat High Court and the Court had directed the Central Government to take a decision on

environmental clearance under the coastal regulation zone notification of 1991.

The Environment Ministry appointed a committee, headed by Mr Anil Agarwal to look into the issue and report back to the Ministry. In his report to the Ministry, Mr Agarwal has pointed out that the creek mangrove mud flat grass bet ecosystem, off Western Kutch, is known to be ecologically sensitive and is a productive natural ecosystem providing livelihood and fish to the population living around it.

The Committee said that Khauthar Bet joins the Kharo Creek which has extensive mud flats on one side and mangroves on the other and that the outlet for the project vessel is contemplated along this creek.

Mr Agarwal point out that part of the approach road to the jetty had been built on the mud flats surrounding the southern side of the bet. Hoof marks of the Chinkara were seen on the bet.

The CRZ regulations had already been violated with eight to 10 feet of soil being heaped on the mud flats. The Survey of India map sheets of 1990 showed that the area fell within the west mangrove reserve forests and the mangroves seemed in good condition. A large number of waders were seen on the mud flats and 14 species of birds identified.

At Chukh Creek the committee saw good mangroves and residual scattered mangroves on either side of the approach to Khauthar bet. Facing the jetty on the opposite bank, the committee found luxuriant growth of mangroves on most mud flats.

During construction and actual operation of the jetty, the committee warned of chronic oil spills from barges. Bunkering, it said,

would have adverse impact on the mangroves and should be prevented. Along the Gujarat coastline the mangroves of the region were among the least disturbed, continuous and most luxuriant.

The committee recommended that the activities proposed by Sanghi Industries on Kharo Creek, their future expansion, if any, and other similar activities proposed by other companies should be reviewed and evaluated within the context of a regional coastal zone management plan which concentrates industrial activities and provides for sufficient mitigation measures.

It was pointed out that the company had sought separate clearances for the captive limestone mines, cement manufacturing plant, captive jetty and power plant from the Gujarat State Pollution Control Board and the Ministry of Environment and Forests between 1992 and 1996 and the appraising agencies could not appreciate the total environmental impact of the entire project. The committee said it was not able to get a picture of the environmental impact of the project on the ecosystem.

Ms Pratibha Pande and Dr B. C. Choudhary from the Wildlife Institute, two experts of the committee, also wrote to the Ministry expressing their reservation and differences with some crucial aspects of the Chairman's report to the Ministry.

At the end of December Sanghi Industries were heard by the experts again. Ms Pande raised fresh points on creeks being used as nursing ground by fish and marine species and that clinker from the 2.6 million ton cement plant would be sent to the grinding unit 13.5 km away on Khauthar Bet by a conveyor belt.

Saw mills to buzz again in N-E

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Jan. 20

After a gap of over a year, some saw mills will start buzzing again in the North-East and some 7-8 lakh cubic metres of illicitly felled timber — lying in the forests and depots — will be sold.

On the basis of a public interest litigation filed in the Supreme Court against the December 1996 order which banned operation of saw mills in the North-East unless prior approval of the Central Government had been acquired, the court has now permitted disposal of timber. But first the Principal Chief Conservator of Forest has to do an inventory of the felled timber in the State. This has to be transported to specified forest depots.

However, the court has said illicit timber found with any offender or abandoned in the forests would be confiscated by the State Government.

The court order is based on the report of a high-powered committee, appointed by the Environment and Forest Ministry. The panel said that wood lying in the depots for one or two years was decaying. That was affecting its monetary value and it should be disposed of before the next monsoon.

Proliferation of wood-based industries was the main cause for the degradation of forests in the North-East. Sixty-four per cent of

the geographical area of these states was under forests. However, the experts said it was neither feasible nor desirable to completely ban timber trade or the running of wood-based industries.

Their number and capacities had to be regulated for sustainable availability of forest produce. Wood-based industries, the experts said, should be relocated in specified industrial zones. Industrial requirements had to be subordinated to the maintenance of environment and ecology and bona fide local needs.

The Ministry of Environment and Forest offered to open a separate cell in the ministry and a satellite office of the Forest Survey of India in Shillong for the necessary technical backup.

The court said logs found suitable for manufacture of veneer and plywood would be processed by the state in its factories and then marketed freely.

Private timber owners whose stocks have been cleared by the high-power committee will have the option of selling the timber either directly or in the auction organised by the state forest departments. State governments will have to notify industrial units in consultation with the Environment Ministry.

The state governments have to ensure disposal of illegal timber before permitting the disposal of authorised timber available with the wood-based industries. Trans-

portation of the auctioned timber outside the north-eastern states will be through the railways only under the supervision of the forest department.

The court has said that the price of the timber supplied to industries should be at the market rate. The existing royalty is to be reviewed and raised.

Licences given to all wood-based industries stand suspended and only industries cleared by the committee without penalties have the option of shifting to the industrial estates to be developed in six months' time. Units which have been penalised can approach the committee before Feb. 9 for a licence. The discretion of giving a licence has been left to the committee. There is to be a moratorium on issuing new licences for the next five years.

Within 45 days state governments will have to identify forest divisions where illegal felling has taken place and initiate action against those found responsible.

The existing permit system on trees has been abolished and states have been told to provide financial assistance (in or in the form of timber) only to local tribals for their bona fide use. This concessional timber cannot be sold.

The court has also said that the money from sale of seized timber, penalties, etc. should be given back from the state exchequer for raising forest plantations with the help of the tribals.

Military hits banks' function

Caste-benefit study of projects mooted

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Jan. 21

The shortage of trained technical persons to do environment impact assessment of projects was clearly spelt out at a two-day consultation of the Environment and Forest Ministry's social audit panel with chairpersons of Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Committees, NGOs and representatives of industry.

While some NGOs maintained that the data put forward for EIA clearance was fudged, the chairman of an expert committee pointed out that many of the consultants did not have the equipment or the expertise for doing an EIA. He stressed the need for training as well as rating the consultants.

At least two NGOs have suggested that an independent Environment Impact Assessment Authority like the Central Pollution Control Board be set up. It should be outside the purview of the Ministry. Since consultants' fees are very often tied up with

project clearance, it was suggested that the entire process of project assessment be done through experts representing an independent agency.

It was also suggested that the guidelines for giving environment clearances should be updated and strictly enforced. Both NGOs and some expert committee chairmen suggested that site clearance should be sought for all major projects where large populations are involved or ecological areas affected. "A *jan sunwai*, (public hearing) at the project site was mooted.

Another activist suggested that a list be prepared of wildlife sanctuaries, virgin forests and archaeologically and culturally sensitive areas where no projects will be permitted. This list of 'green areas', it was suggested, should be circulated in advance to industrialists with instructions to keep off from them.

Representatives of the industry spoke on the need for cutting delays in clearance and said that EIA reports were within the ambit of the entrepreneur.

An NGO representative who

was earlier on the thermal power committee said since every project would have some impact on the environment, the project assessment report should state if the economic benefits outweighed the damage to environment. While cost-benefit analysis is now an accepted norm, caste-benefit analysis has now been proposed.

Who benefits from a project — the affluent, upper crust living in the big cities or do some of the benefits reach the poor, the tribals and those whose lands are taken?

It was also suggested that the benefits of mining and power projects should be shared with the local people and the land-for-land compensation model made mandatory for resettlement projects. Only a third of those ousted since Independence had been resettled, it was pointed out.

Annual mandatory revalidation of projects cleared and monitoring network of projects cleared was also proposed. A major grievance of the NGOs has been that the conditions of clearance are seldom observed.

Several NGOs were unhappy

with the Centre's decision to decentralise clearance of 250 mega watts power projects. If there was to be decentralisation, clearances should be by the people and not the State Government, it was pointed out. "Is our environment so good that we can reverse the 1994 EIA notification," asked an NGO associated with the Ministry's expert committees for several areas. "States will put out advertisements in newspapers to attract business saying 'no environmental barriers' here."

However, former environment secretary R. Rajamani said it was wrong to assume that all knowledge was vested only in the Centre.

Mr Abid Husain, former civil servant now with the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, said the environmental paradigm was being added to the economic one to check those with vested interest. A people's constituency for environment had to be built. Mr Husain supported large projects which capture the imagination of people like the Ganga Action Plan. The meeting was presided by retired Supreme Court judge, Justice Pathak.

Projects to be cleared after people's consent

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Jan. 23

A public hearing will be made mandatory before any development project — be it a dam, mine or thermal unit — gets environmental clearance.

The 1994 notification, issued under the Environment Protection Act of 1986, for environmental impact assessment of various projects is being amended and the approval of the local residents sought. NGOs have been demanding that the consent of the local people should be mandatory for all development projects.

Mr J. K. A. Nair, Secretary, Environment and Forests, said that with the enforcement of the amended notification trans-

parency would be brought into Government functioning and people would have a say on projects coming up in their backyards.

A lot of projects are delayed due to lack of information, Mr Nair said. Now every nuance of a development project can be scrutinised and discussed by those living in its vicinity. The Committee of Secretaries as well as the Cabinet have approved the draft notification.

Earlier this week the issue of mandatory public hearings under the Environment Protection Act was discussed by State Secretaries of Environment. The benefits of transparency outweighed apprehensions that public hearings would delay projects.

Mr Nair said that even if there

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People's consent to be made mandatory

Continued from page 1 col. 2 was decentralisation of powers to clear projects, as with power units of up to 250 MW, public hearings would be a statutory requirement.

According to the proposed amendment, the Impact Assessment Agency has to publish a notice of environmental public hearing in at least two newspapers of general circulation, one of them in the language of the locality concerned. The notice must be published within 30 days of the receipt of a proposal. A summary of the project proposal, including its environment impact assessment and environment management plan, has to be made available to the people of the area.

These reports will be available at the district industry centre, the office of the chief executive officer of the zila parishad or the commissioner of the municipal corporation, the State Pollution Control Board office, the office of the Environment Secretary concerned and the impact assessment division of the Ministry of Environment and Forests.

Written comments and suggestions can be sent to the Central Government within 20 days of the announcement of the public hearing. The Environment Appraisal Committees will consider the written submissions and views expressed at the public hearing before deciding on the environmental clearance.

'Plantation cos will fail to deliver the goods'

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Feb. 25
Companies growing teak plantations all over the country on investments made by the public will not be able to deliver the massive volume of teakwood that will give them a return of 50 to 89 times their investment in 20 years.

This damning indictment of companies running teak plantations on public money has been made by the six-member expert committee headed by P. B. Gangopadhyay, head silviculturist, Indian Council of Forestry Research and education. The committee was appointed in April 1996 after an inter-departmental meeting felt that the claims of companies starting teak plantations was on the high side and needed to be scrutinised.

According to the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), there are some 400-odd companies growing teak wood on public investments totally Rs 2,500 crore. The teak plantation business began in the early ninties and the oldest plantations are six to seven years old. Assured at least 50 times their investment in 20 years, a lot of people yearning to promote the country's green cover poured in their money.

The experts — M. S. Haque of NABARD, S. P. Pathak of the Department of Company Affairs, R. Chaurasia of Ballarpur Industries, S. K. Agarwal of the Forest Research Institute of India and A. R. Chadha DIG-Forests, Environment Ministry as Secretary of the Committee — feel investors would be lucky to get 15 to 20 per cent of the timber that has been assured.

The committee visited Sterling Tree Magnum and Anubhav Plantations of Madras, Parasrampuria Plantations of Maharashtra, Sanghi Plantation of Hyderabad and Enbee Plantation of Madhya Pradesh. It also spoke to representatives of 200 other companies which had got their investments but had not yet started their plantations.

The cost of investment raised per acre ranged between Rs 4.44 lakh and Rs 10.75 lakh per year and was exorbitant as compared to the cost norms of Rs 12,000 per acre incurred by NABARD and others, the experts have said. "There does not appear to be any system to ensure proper investment of people's money. The companies must indicate how invest-

ments raised for maintenance of plantations for 20 years will be invested till required. If there are other sources of income generation for payment of promised returns these must also be spelled out," the committee has said.

The expected growth rate of the trees and the yield of timber as projected by the companies, the committee has said is "too ambitious and far from reality even with additional inputs." It has said the companies should project realistic yields based on technical parameters and reflected in technical projects prepared by the companies.

The experts have recommended continuance of the companies but stressed the need to safeguard the interests of investors by involving SEBI. To ensure that the projects made by companies are technically sound it has recommended that the project document and management plan prepared by companies should be cleared by the State Forest Department, the Forest Corporations or the ICFRE.

The Ministry of Environment and Forests has been asked to issue suitable guidelines to modify and streamline local laws relating to felling, transit and sale of timber.

Most of the sites for the plantations are on marginal agricultural or waste lands purchased from individuals and unfit for high quality teak plantations. Site quality should be taken into consideration while projecting returns, the experts have said. The seeds used are also not genetically sound enough to warrant the high yields projected.

Spacing of 2x2 metres is crucial for successful plantation of teak because girth of the timber produced is more important for market value than the biomass produced.

The lack of transparency on details of plantations has irked the committee. It has recommended clear disclosure by companies on investment collected, trees to be planted per unit area and trees to be retained upto harvesting age.

In forests of good quality timber is grown at a rotation of 60 to 80 years but the companies have projected a return of 35 to 40 cft on a rotation of 20 years. This growth rate is not technically feasible, the committee has said.

Environment and Forest Minister, Mr Saifuddin Soz, has looked at the report of the experts but has not had time to take action.

Ban on export of medicinal plants

Exporters seek more time to fulfil obligations

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, March 5

Even as reports of theft of India's biodiversity are coming in from various parts of the country, Chemexil, the umbrella organisation of exporters and traders of medicinal plants, is putting pressure on both the Environment and Forest Ministry and the Commerce Ministry to give it more time to fulfil its pre-ban export obligation of largely medicinal plants.

It was in March 1994 that the Commerce Ministry issued a public notice banning the export of 46 plants, plant portions and their derivatives. These included *taxus baccata* used for treatment of cancer, *artemisia spp* used for malarial drugs and perfumes, *gentiana kurroo* (*kuiki*), a tonic used for stimulating gastric secretions and *gynocardia odorata* used for treatment of leprosy. Subsequently, 10 more plant species were added to the negative list of exports.

The traders appealed to the

Commerce Ministry and they were given time till August 1996 to fulfil their pre-ban export commitments. They then sought more relief and they were given time till the end of 1996. Simultaneously, they gave an assurance that the medicinal plants exported would be cultivated and not extracted from the wild. Now the Council wants 18 of the 56 species to be deleted from the negative list.

India became a party to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in February 1994 but to date it has not been able to finalise its status report on biodiversity or draft the long-awaited legislation on biodiversity conservation. In fact, biodiversity convention does not even figure in the current Government's Common Minimum Programme or list of priorities.

Thirty botanical institutes, on the basis of three workshops, have compiled a list of 214 medicinal plants assessed by them. Forty-nine of these plants have been

listed as critically important, and 43 as "endangered". Twelve of the 18 plants that the traders want deleted are to be listed as critical or endangered.

Within the Environment Ministry there are pressures from the conservation minded not to waste any more time and bring all 92 medicinal plants identified by the botanists under the Wildlife Act, the only legislation so far that provides for protection of flora and fauna in the wild.

Several countries are already casting covetous eyes on India's rich biological wealth. One of the 12 megadiversity regions of the world, India is estimated to have 45,000 plant species, or seven per cent of the world's flora. There are reports of foreigners disappearing with fistfuls of Indian soil rich in organisms and the bark of *taxus baccata* (*yewu/birm*) used in drugs for cancer treatment. From the Western Ghats, *Rauwolfia spp* (*serpaganda*), an endangered species used in the treatment of blood

pressure, is clandestinely being smuggled out. And from around the Gulf of Mannar thousands of sea horses are being collected and taken out.

In Kulu, a cooperative of *kuth* (*saussurea lappa*) growers is cultivating the plant used for treatment of hypertension and asthma.

Though the export of the wild species of these important medicinal plants is banned, there is no ban on exports if these same plants are from farm plantations and a certificate of cultivation is procured from the Regional Deputy Director (Wildlife) of Chief Conservator of Forests. Red Sanders, found largely in Andhra Pradesh, is the only species on the negative export list whose export, even in the cultivated form, is banned. Red Sanders is a good natural dye for food stuffs. Musical instruments are also made from its wood and are in great demand in Japan where a red sanders musical instrument is a must in every bride's dowry.

While the Environment Ministry wants to restrict export of genetic resources — germ plasm of wheat, rice and pulses — it is difficult for most people to distinguish between the seed and the grain. In fact, the Commerce Ministry fears that export of agricultural products will suffer if there are too many sniffer dog restrictions. Though regional offices for checking of plant exports exist at Mumbai, Calcutta, Cochin, Delhi and Chennai, no one is quite sure how effective or alert they are.

While the mandarins of the Environment Ministry grapple with the manifold dimensions of the biodiversity law that has to be framed, it is not going to be easy to protect the traditional rights to livelihood and indigenous knowledge of herbs that have not been documented. While modern medicine is depending more and more on plants and herbal medicines, tourists with free access to wilderness areas can just walk off with seeds and no one would know.

Aquaculture panel to monitor shrimp farms

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, March 18

The Cabinet has approved the setting up of an Aquaculture Authority which will review the existing shrimp and prawn farms and prescribe guidelines for construction and maintenance of such farms in coastal areas in all land above the high tideline.

This to be done through the introduction of a Bill by the Ministry of Agriculture in the current session of Parliament. The Cabinet after consulting the Ministries of Law, environment and forests, agriculture and commerce has decided to act quickly in what it considers is the economic interests of the country to counter the Supreme Court ruling on shrimp farms. Demolition of the farms for a year till the authority looks into the case of each farm has been accepted by the Cabinet.

This is being done even after the SC has rejected seven review petitions of aqua farm owners and the Government is fully aware that the

pending review petition of the Agriculture Ministry is likely to meet the same fate.

In fact the Supreme Court order directed the Central Government to constitute an authority under the Environment (Protection) Act to protect ecologically fragile coastal areas, sea shore and water front and deal with the situation created by the shrimp culture industry in coastal areas. But the authority, as visualised by the Centre, can order demolition of a pond or farm only after hearing the owner of the farm.

The Ministry of Law, and Justice, which prepared the note for Cabinet suggested "an alternate plan of action" to keep alive aquaculture. If this is not done, the note argues, there would be a severe setback to development along the coastline of the country.

As per Supreme Court directive all aquaculture industries functioning within the coastal regulation zone and within 1000 metres of Chilka and Pulicat lakes were to be closed/demolished on or before March 31. On the principle of

"polluter pays" damages were to be paid for the harm done to environment.

Some 118,000 ha were under prawn and shrimp farms in 1995-96 and an estimated 70,500 tonnes of the exotic fish was produced. The Cabinet note points out that not even 10 per cent of the coastal area identified as suitable for brackish-water aquaculture has been utilised.

The Cabinet note, prepared by the Law Ministry, found the reasons given by the Supreme Court for demolition of the aquaculture farms unsustainable. It has found fault with the NEERI report on aquaculture prepared for the court as well as with the paper prepared by Dr K. Alagarswami, Director, Central Institute of Brackishwater Aquaculture, for FAO but used as technical paper by the court.

The Cabinet note argues that shrimp farms in the Asia Pacific region (China, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines) and Latin America have gone through the same evolutionary processes as In-

dia for development of viable technologies but none of them banned aquaculture.

The Ministries which have expressed an interest in continuance of shrimp farming have chosen to rely on the report of Dr Staffan Holmgren (an environmental assessment of the Bay of Bengal region) published by the Swedish Centre for Coastal Development and Management of Aquatic Resources.

The proposed authority will have the power to licence each existing farm/pond as well as new ones that may be established after the authority comes into existence.

The CRZ notification of 1991 is to be amended to permit aquaculture as agriculture under CRZ — 3,200 metres from the high tide line. The note for Cabinet states categorically that notwithstanding any law in force or order or judgment of any court the provisions of the Bill will prevail.

The estimated expenditure of the authority in the first year has been put at Rs 130 lakh.

Panel allows dilution in forest Act

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, July 31

Very quietly this February, the Committee of Secretaries has diluted the 1980 Forest Conservation Act by allowing diversion of degraded forest land for compensatory afforestation for Central Government projects in forest areas.

Earlier, too, development projects were allowed on forest land without making a provision of equivalent non-forest land for compensatory afforestation. But this was only in exceptional cases with the Chief Secretary of the concerned State certifying that no forest land was available for the compensatory afforestation.

As per the instructions issued recently by the Inspector General of Forests, Ministry of Environment and Forests, proposals for Central Government projects providing for the compensatory afforestation can now be submitted directly without a certificate from the Chief Secretary stating that non-forest land is not available. Mr Samar Singh, former Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Environment and

Forests and currently Secretary-General of the WWF India said, "The guidelines negate the very purpose of the FC Act."

The FC Act was enacted by Parliament to check indiscriminate diversion of precious forest land for non-forest use. The Act stipulates that (1) forest land can be used for development projects only in cases where non-forest land is not available or cannot be used; (2) the diversion of forest land was to be the bare minimum. If the first two conditions are fulfilled when an equivalent amount of non-forest was to be made available for compensatory afforestation to set off the loss of the forest land.

These conditions were stipulated so that forest land is resorted to as the last option. Now instead of making available non-forest land, money will have to be provided by the project coming up in forest areas. The amount could vary from Rs 2,000 to Rs 30,000 per hectare and the responsibility for afforestation will be that of the Forest Department.

Those opposed to the new guidelines point out that the di-

version of prime forest areas will be faster because there is plenty of non-forest land and the country's record of compensatory afforestation is dismal.

Forest conservation experts fear the revised guidelines will render the FC Act ineffective. They are shocked that the guidelines are being issued when the status of the Indian forests and the FC Act are being looked into by the Supreme Court.

As a result of the FC Act, diversion of forest land for non-forest use came down from 1.42 lakh hectares per year prior to 1980 to 0.25 lakh hectares per year in subsequent years.

Further the implementation of the compensatory afforestation clause is extremely poor. As against 3 lakh hectares over which compensatory afforestation was to be done till the rains of 1990, it was done only on 40,000 hectares. Most states have not even bothered to identify or transfer the non-forest land for compensatory afforestation.

The Centre's argument for the new guidelines are that important development projects were getting held up due to delay in

identifying and transferring suitable non-forest land to the forest department. "To avoid these delays which have given a bad name to the Environment Ministry, the guidelines were revised."

The Governments of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan have agreed to create a "degraded forest plantation", bank which can be availed of by the proponents of the Central sector project in other States, if the State Governments where such projects are sited cannot undertake the compensatory afforestation within their own forest areas.

The Government has also pointed out that 3,09,839 sq km of 24.7 per cent of the forest lands are degraded and Rs 310 billion would be needed over the next 25 years to restock them. Due to escalating biotic pressure (both animal and human) the degradation of these forest areas continues. The Government circular even admits that afforestation has reduced from 89,000 sq km in the Seventh Five Year Plan to about 72,000 sq km in the eighth. What it does not admit is that the Government's record in afforestation is dismal.

Forest Dept 'encourages' tree-felling in Assam

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Aug. 12

Are forest officials of Assam colluding with timber merchants to ensure a steady supply of wood for the 544 factories in the State?

The Ministry of Environment and Forests has begun its investigations into the issue on the basis of information documented and supplied to the Supreme Court by the TV Rajeswar committee. The committee was appointed by the court to prepare an inventory of timber and timber products.

The Assam Government had asserted that there was no green-felling in the State, which means that no trees are cut by the department, nor any quota of timber allotted for the factories. So where were the 427 saw mills, 79 veneer-cum-saw mills and 38 plywood factories getting their raw material from? In fact 76 more mills of all three categories are licensed but are inoperative.

When the Rajeswar committee probed deeper into this issue, it was told that the timber-based industries were operating with auctioned timber, seized from illegal felling and allotted to these factories. The committee noted "this is indeed a strange explanation. This could only mean that the forest department indirectly encourages illicit felling on a big scale."

It is pertinent to point out that the forest survey of India shows a steady decline in the forest cover of the north-east. Between 199 and 1995 the forest cover in Assam declined by 447 sq.kms.

As forest cover shrunk saw mills mushroomed — from 4 plywood factories in 1983 to 38 this year. There has been a phenomenal growth of saw mills and saw-cum-veneer mills too.

Though most of the factories depend upon timber from Arunachal and other north-eastern States, the figures collected by the Rajeswar committee in respect of seven factories of Assam revealed that over 35 per cent of their supply came from within Assam; 25 per cent from Arunachal, 28 per cent from Nagaland, 8 per cent from Meghalaya and just a per cent or two was imported.

Mining projects ripping apart forest corridors

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Aug. 20

Wildlife conservationists are concerned at the pace at which mining projects are being cleared in and around protected areas like national parks, tiger reserves and wildlife sanctuaries.

Almost every major industry has claimed a chunk of the mineral wealth locked up in the rich forest areas. The mood in a section of the Environment and Forest Ministry seems to favour speedy "development". Forest corridors, instead of being repaired, are being ripped apart making it difficult for elephants, tigers and the smaller species to establish any kind of territorial rights.

While Gujarat Ambuja's proposal for a limestone mining lease on 905 hectares of land, just five kms from the boundary of Gir National Park, has run into rough weather because of the pressure of NGOs, SAIL's Kemmangundi iron ore project proposal for the renewal of mining lease just 6 kms

from the Bandra wildlife sanctuary in Karnataka, has been cleared.

Ironically, the Environment Ministry's expert committee on mining at its meeting in May has noted that quarrying has been on at the site from 1923 to 1983 without adequate environmental safeguards. The mined areas have been ravaged like a war zone and experts have suggested reclamation of the old open mines.

The approval for another mining lease for iron ore on 1936 hectares of rich sal forests in the Saranda forest division of Bihar has been withheld till site inspection. However, in principle, 863 hectares of forest land has been cleared to the Kiriburu iron ore mines.

At the current pace, there will be neither wildlife nor protected areas in the next 15 to 20 years, warn conservationists.

In addition to these three mining leases, recently clearance was given for a mining lease in the vicinity of the Tadoba tiger reserve, Maharashtra. Dolomite

mining is on in and around Buxa tiger reserve in West Bengal. And in the vicinity of Palamau Tiger reserve, the lease for limestone mining has been renewed.

There are seven mines quarrying for limestone on 930 hectares of forest land in the proposed extension of the Madhav National Park, Madhya Pradesh. On the border of the Panna Tiger Reserve as well as in the heart of Gangau sanctuary, white sandstone is being mined. At Kailadevi, in the buffer of the famous Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve, red sandstone and limestone is being extracted.

In fact, the Ministry of Environment and Forests seems to be split into two parts. While the Environment Impact Division, which gives clearance to all projects of over Rs 50 crore, is pushing through proposals on the assurance that they will be managed environmentally, the wildlife conservation section has filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court saying "we strongly endorse

the suggestion to treat national parks and sanctuaries as no development zones."

The additional IG for Wildlife, Mr S. C. Dey, has pointed out at a recent meeting of wildlife protectors that Rs 40,000 crore of mineral wealth is extracted annually from forest areas of the country.

In his affidavit to the Delhi High Court on what the Ministry was doing to save the country's wildlife, Mr Dey stated that under the January 1994 notification national parks and sanctuaries have been categorised 'ecologically sensitive'. No industrial activity or infrastructure building is normally permitted within a radius of 25 kms.

However, the limestone mining lease to the Ambujas was being pushed through despite the Wild Life Institute of Dehradun pointing out that "any action that will even remotely have negative impact on the Gir forests and the lion population should be stopped."

"The project will result in disturbance which in turn will impact on the quality of the wildlife habitat in and around Gir forests. The current area of the proposed mines is used by local people for farming to meet their fuelwood and grazing requirements. The area acts as a buffer to Gir forests from human pressure. If the project is allowed it will destroy the biomass resources of the local population and transfer these pressure on to Gir," the experts have warned.

A similar study by the WII on the impact of iron ore mines in Saranda forest division shows that the Koina river that runs through it has been polluted and a crucial habitat of the elephants is threatened. The survival of aquatic life forms can be affected by the low dissolved oxygen levels and high turbidity of the river. In fact, the Gangetic dolphins have disappeared from the river and strict enforcement of the Environment (Protection) Act was recommended for the Kiriburu Iron Ore Mines.

Forest cover only 12 pc, admits Soz

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Aug. 24

The actual forest cover in India is not 19 per cent but less than 12 per cent, Environment and Forest Minister Saifuddin Soz has admitted. Purely for ecological reasons the forest policy has been harping on the need for a forest cover of 33 per cent.

The fate of the fragmented forest patches that have survived is also uncertain. They are also the repositories of the mineral and limestone wealth of the country and in the name of development, every State Government is casting covetous eyes on these deposits. There is pressure to open up the forest areas of Bastar which were once considered sacrosanct.

As the additional IG for forests, Mr S. K. Pandey, put it the rich forests, tribal and mineral maps of the country coincide and with tribals wanting roads, better employment opportunities and the fruits of development, efforts are on to rework the whole fabric of sustainable development. In fact very few voices are being raised for forest conservation.

Even while the Ministry is reviewing its decade-old forest policy to give special attention to the ravaged forests of the North East and greater thrust to forest management with communities living around the forest areas there seems to be a lot of doublespeak.

Recently there has been dilution of the 198 Forest Conservation Act which had made it difficult for non-forest projects to come up on forest land. Public sector projects can now come up in forest areas without non-forest land being provided for compensatory afforestation. Instead these companies will deposit money for development of degraded forest areas. The next couple of years will see prime

forests being replaced by money-spinning 'development' and power generating projects.

With our record for afforestation is dismal whether on wastelands or forest land. When the wasteland development board was set up by Rajiv Gandhi in mid-eighties, he had set an ambitious target of 5 million ha a year. The plantation rate is currently down to 15,000 sq kms a year. With 3 lakh sq. kms crying out for rehabilitation it would take 20 years to regreen the degraded forest areas.

With our forests doomed so is the magnificent tiger, the elephant, other species of wildlife and the biodiversity which we hope to protect through a law.

Dense forests or forests with a crown density of 40 per cent is down to 11.73 per cent. Timber traders, saw mill operators as well as State Governments have been running from pillar to post to get the ban lifted. In fact many of them have raised the bogey of unemployment for those working in these industries as well as mines that were operating in forest areas and were closed. ②

In Arunachal Pradesh politicians and bureaucrats own saw and veneer mills in their name or that of a close relative. It is now learnt that every Government servant working in the State is entitled to one or two trees, approximately 600 cubic feet, for construction activity. This privilege is given not just to tribals or poor people but to all bureaucrats — the chief secretary, the forest officials as well as the governor of the State. While some of them may actually use the perk for constructing their own house, many of them just sell their permit to a timber contractor.

Ironically the North East which accounts for 8 per cent of the country's geographical areas has 25 per cent of the total forest cover and 30 per cent of the growing stock.

Biodiversity policy to be presented to PM

From Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Sept. 3

A presentation of the nation's biodiversity policy with inputs from the top scientists of the country like Dr M. S. Swaminathan, Dr T. N. Khoshoo and Prof Madhav Gadgil is to be made to the Prime Minister on Friday.

Based on the draft, the country's first Biological Diversity Conservation Bill is to be prepared and presented to Parliament. Since this will be one of the first biological diversity conservation legislations of the world, the Environment and Forest Minister Saifuddin Soz is keen to ensure it has a smooth sailing and becomes a model bill that other countries can draw on. Prof Soz had taken great care to tap the knowledge of scientists based in the North-East and Jammu and Kashmir as well as of activists like Dr Suman Sahai.

Patenting, however, will be out of the purview of the proposed legislation since natural resources cannot be patented. Only products, biotechnology or the processes leading to commercial use of a wild species can be patented.

The policy enunciates that India has sovereign rights over its biological resources, says Prof Soz. Eleven areas have been identified for the draft action plan — legal and policy framework; survey of biodiversity and national database; in situ and ex-situ conservation; sustainable utilisation; indigenous knowledge systems; innovations and practices and benefit sharing; peoples participation; research and international cooperation and education, training and extension.

In fact the draft action plan was discussed at a national consultation in June. The implementation of the action plan is to be done by the State governments, various central sectoral ministries and departments.

In specific terms, the legislation seeks to regulate access to biological resources, notification of areas important from the standpoint of biodiversity and protection of threatened species. India is one of the 12 megadiversity regions of the world and has seven per cent of the world's flora. So far 49,000 plants and 81,000 animals have been catalogued.

By consulting Dr R. S. Paroda, D-G Indian Council of Agricultural Research, the Environment Ministry has ensured there will be no duplication with resources that concern the Agriculture Ministry. With *neem* being patented abroad and other plant species like *telex baccata*, used in treatment of cancer, being surreptitiously exported, Prof Soz said the legislation would seek to protect biological re-

sources of the country from use by foreign individuals, institutions and companies without sharing the benefits of the resources.

Even if a plant or animal species is given for research and commercial exploitation, provisions are being made for the individual or company to pay royalty, fees or a lump sum in addition to sharing the benefits of research.

The draft policy, Prof Soz said, would protect the rights of traditional users and local people to the resource. Indian researchers and academic institutions would also have free access to the resource. It is estimated that there are 11 lakh unlicensed *ojhas* or medical practitioners and 4 lakh unlicensed vaidas.

The draft suggests the setting up of the national and state authorities, headed by an eminent scientist and assisted by six others, who will screen all applications for access to biological resources. While the national authority will deal with requests from foreign individuals, academic institutions and companies for access to resources as well as transfer of results of research to foreign institutions and companies, the state authorities will deal local applications and research use. State authorities will also advise on management of notified areas.

A national biodiversity fund and a state biodiversity fund have also been proposed. Allocations to the national and state funds are to be made from consolidated fund of India.

4 ultres DSE

Move on power projects alarms environmentalists

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Sept. 16

The recent announcement by Prime Minister Deve Gowda that power projects upto Rs 1,000 crore will not need Central clearance has sent out signals that the Environment Impact Assessment, which is mandatory for all power projects, will now be given the go by.

So far all projects with an investment of over Rs 50 crore have to get Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) clearance.

Ashish Kothari, environmentalist and a former member of the Environment Ministry's expert committee on river valley projects, says to give the environment clearance authority to the States would be disastrous. Even with the Centre giving the clearance, it is difficult to get project authorities to understand the importance of environment.

Mr Ranjit Singh, former additional secretary in the Environment Ministry looking after EIA, says if the Government goes back on the norms it has set for environment clearance, civic minded citizens will have no choice but to turn to the courts. "The Government will be diluting its own standards for making industry environment conscious."

States, he warns, will give the

green signal for power projects with an investment of less than Rs 1000, then will keep adding more such units — all costing less than Rs 1,000 crore. And if power projects can get EIA and central clearance exemption, what is to stop industries, mining and irrigation projects from seeking similar waivers. It will have a snow balling effects, warns Mr Ranjit Singh.

Mr Shekhar Singh of the Indian Institute of Public Administration, who was for a stint chairman of the expert committee for thermal projects, says at the State level, no one ever says anything against establishment of projects. In the case of the Kayamkullam project in Kerala and the Dholpur power project, he recalls the State Chief Ministers put pressure not only on their own officials, but on the expert committees and the Environment Minister to get the projects cleared.

Mr Singh says, while the Centre gets bogged down with a flood of cases, the States have too many vested interests to think of environmental safeguards or rehabilitation of people affected by projects. EIA, he says should be the responsibility of an independent, statutory authority.

The Prime Minister's statement comes at a time when the conditional environment clearance given to 1507 projects has been challenged in the

Supreme Court by former Environment Minister and activist Maneka Gandhi. The petition comes up for hearing next week.

Mrs Gandhi has sought cancellation of permission given without comprehensive EIA to several projects, including the Cogentrix power project. She maintains that clearances are given but the conditions seldom fulfilled.

The case which is being fought by Mr M. C. Mehta will have considerable repercussions on the functioning of the Environment and Forest Ministry, the nodal agency for giving clearances after Environment Impact Assessment (EIA).

On June 11, conditional clearance was given to the Mangalore power project (Cogentrix) with a stipulation that it should fulfil 19 conditions. Point 16 of the conditional clearance says, "the EIA for the proposed SPM facility shall be submitted within three months and the comprehensive EIA within a year." The petition has pointed out that clearance was given without an EIA.

Till April 30 this year, the petition says, conditional clearances were given to 1507 projects — 205 mining, 387 industries, 13 atomic power, 254 thermal power, 346 river valley and 302 others.

The petition has sought the removal of EIA work from the

purview of the Ministry and the setting up of an independent National Environment Impact Assessment Authority, headed by a retired Supreme Court judge and with two technical experts and a well-known environmentalist.

Mr Kothari says conditional clearance is a farce. Last year Kothari and his team studied 200 river valley projects cleared in the last 26 years and found that over 80 per cent had not fulfilled the conditions on which they were cleared. No project authority was prosecuted or a project stopped for not fulfilling conditions.

The Narmada project was given clearance in 1987 on the condition that a master plan would be drawn up for the entire Sardar Sarovar Project, proper rehabilitation for the project displaced and comprehensive afforestation of double the forest area lost. There were other conditions too but none have been fulfilled. The conditions — including a disaster management plan — on the basis of which clearance was given to the Tehri Dam — were not fulfilled, says Mr Singh.

Many of the expert committees, constituted by the Environment Ministry, were headed by retired secretaries to the government or politicians. The petition names two former secretaries and a former Minister from Rajasthan, Madho Singh, who headed the expert committee for mining. Such

appointments, the petition states, are in violation of EIA notification which states that the chairman will be an outstanding ecologist or environmentalist or technical professional with managerial experience in the development sector.

Among the projects brought before the purview of the Court are the Goshree integrated island development project at Cochin, the Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals Ltd., the Sinarmass Pulp and Paper mill and the thermal power project of the Bombay Suburban Electric Supply Ltd. at Dahanu, Maharashtra.

In the Goshree project, the petition says some 250 hectares are to be reclaimed from the sea, off the coast of Cochin which Environment Ministry maps show as being an ecologically sensitive area rich in mangroves. New pipelines are to be laid on the sea bed for supply of water to a township being created without studying the carrying capacity.

The Dahanu power project was cleared in 1988/89 with the condition that it would have to set up a Flue Gas Desulphurisation (FGD) unit and develop a green belt round the plant. Neither of these conditions were fulfilled. In fact in 1993 the BSEB Ltd. sought a year's grace to instal the FGD unit.

Pilot for social audit panel for his ministry

by Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Sept 30: The new Minister for Environment and Forests, Mr Rajesh Pilot, proposes to set up a social audit panel, on the lines of the one he set up when he was in charge of the Communication Ministry, to act as a buffer between the policy-maker - the Ministry - and the people.

The five-member panel will have eminent people like Dr M.S. Swaminathan, Dr T.N. Khoshoo, scientist and former Environment Secretary, Mr P. Rajamani, also former Environment Secretary, and someone from the legal world like Mr Justice Bhagwati.

In an interview, Mr Pilot said this panel would have the powers to modify and advise on the Government policies.

"The social audit panel worked well in the Communication

Ministry and I am sure it will work well here too," Mr Pilot said. In some ways it would be like an ombudsman to the Ministry to which the industrialists as well as the common man can appeal, he added.

In an attempt to understand the functioning of his Ministry and its concerns about the environment, Mr Pilot recently rounded up his officers and hijacked them to Sariska for a 24-hour brain-storming session on forests and wildlife. To take full advantage of the time available, the Minister drove down in a bus along with his officials. A similar exercise is proposed to understand the intricate problems of pollution.

At Sariska, the forest policy and how to take it to the people was discussed. India has always had a strong tradition of environment. Whether a well was dug or a hut constructed, a tree was

always planted, he said and spoke of his plans to involve the panchayats in the greening of rural India. However, Mr Pilot was not willing to comment on the Ministry's proposal to lease forest land to industries. It is before a group of Ministers and I will accept their views on the subject, he said.

Asked if he had taken any action against the yagna of Chandraswami on the Ridge, Mr Pilot said he was not aware of any specific action being taken against the yagna. However, he said every morning clippings of all stories pertaining to his Ministry were put up to him and he would ask for comments from the concerned officials. This probably led to speculation that he had sought action against the sadhus. Mr Pilot said he had received telegrams from environmental activists about the yagna on the Ridge.

On the Rajasthan Government's proposal to denotify forest areas for the extension of mining leases, Mr Pilot said he had asked for comments from his officers.

Asked about his concerns for wildlife, the Minister said he had never been associated with wildlife and had no particular love for animals, but he was willing to discharge his duties as the head of a Ministry that was to protect wildlife.

The Environment Ministry has been projected as a powerful Ministry. But Mr Pilot would like it to become the common man's Ministry. He would like to introduce transparency in its functioning and plans an Open House after a month when he has a better grasp of the Ministry. Principal chief conservators of forests will be asked to have similar Open Houses in different parts of the country.

Angry Minister shifts top bureaucrats

Penalty for not renewing mining leases in wildlife sanctuary

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Oct. 12
Angry about wildlife and forest officials in his Ministry expressing their inability to renew mining leases right inside the Valmiki Wildlife Sanctuary and Tiger Reserve in his home State, Environment and Forest Minister Jai Narain Prasad Nishad first turned down the trip of the additional I-G, wildlife, to Geneva for an IUCN meeting, then shuffled the inconvenient pack of forest officials.

In the past, work allocation among DIGs had been done only by the Inspector General of Forests. But in this case the Minister has personally transferred five officers three days ago. Mr A. C. Choubey, DIG looking after forest conservation, survey and utilisation who was to go back to his cadre in mid-November, has been banished to

the backwaters of the forest fire division. Mr Choubey, who had made a strong defence against renewing the mining leases to Mr R. P. Verma, Mr Vinay Verma and other influential people of the State has gone on protest leave.

Mr Nishad, however, has said that it was the division that had transferred the officers. He said it was not for them to be posted in one place for too long. Asked if the transfers had anything to do with mining leases not being renewed, he said "*aise tho koi baat nahin*" (no, there is nothing of the kind).

With several cases against the Environment Ministry in the courts, officials have now become cautious about mining leases in protected areas. Mr S. C. Dey, the additional IG for wildlife, had in fact filed an affidavit before the courts "strongly endorsing the suggestion to treat national parks and sanctuaries as no development zones."

On June 25, soon after taking

over as Environment Minister, Mr Nishad himself had endorsed the cancellation of lease to Mr R. P. Verma on 42 hac of forest land in Pandai riverbed for collection of floats, pebbles etc. While endorsing cancellation, he said "information should be speedily collected in respect of all other leases also and similar action should be taken if there has been any violation. We should not wait for third parties to file complaints but should have a strong system of monitoring."

However, after a letter to him from Mr Bhola Ram Toofani, Minister for Animal Husbandry and Fisheries in Bihar, Mr Nishad has had change of heart. However, both the I-G forests and the additional I-G wildlife have stood by their stand that the leases should not be renewed.

It is important to note that most of the mining leases were given before Valmiki Wildlife Sanctuary in West Champaran was notified in

1990. In 1989 a mining lease on over 20 hac of forest land was given to the rich and influential Mr Vinay Verma. The lease was valid till June 1994.

In April 1991, the regional chief conservator of forests, Bhubaneshwar, who was monitoring the leases reported to the Ministry that in violation of the agreement Mr Verma was digging a metre deep into the riverbed and collecting stones and pebbles. The State Government cancelled the lease at the direction of the Centre. Then Vinay Verma appealed to the High Court and was allowed to continue extraction till the end of the original lease period in 1994.

Mr Vinay Verma again approached the Ministry for renewal of the lease. Mr R. P. Verma and Mr R. B. M. Sharma also had mining leases in Valmiki. In July this year Mr R. P. Verma's 10-year lease of 1994 (which officials of the Ministry now admit

should not have been given for it was a notified area) was cancelled for various violations.

The I-G forests has also sought the cancellation of the 10-year lease given to Mr R. B. M. Sharma in 1994 for collection of pebbles and stones from the riverbed inside the sanctuary. There were several reports with the Ministry on Mr Sharma's violation of the lease terms. Mr Nishad, however, is not willing to endorse the stand

In the reallocation of work, Mr J. Kishwan, DIG (Research and Training) who is to go back to his cadre in six months, has been given additional charge of survey and utilisation, DIG C. S. Vedant of NAEB (National Afforestation and Ecology Board) has been posted DIG of externally aided projects. He has been given additional charge of forest conservation work till Bihar cadre office A. N. Prasad joins the Ministry. Mr S. K. Sehrawat has been transferred to NAEB.

A different colour being given to green ministry

by Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Oct 13

LIKE a chameleon changing colours, the Environment and Forest Ministry is in the process of change. In the tenure of Kamal Nath, it was a high-profile ministry seen by the public at large as an elitist ministry. Towards the end of his tenure, Mr Nath was seen as more pro-industry than environment.

Ministry officials were constantly on junkets abroad and Mr Nath himself was on a foreign tour at least once every month as he sought to create a name for himself in the international arena as the champion of environment in the Third World. The Ministry seemed more eager for kudos from abroad than from people within the country.

Rajesh Pilot, on the other hand, seems keen to bring the

focus back to the country's environment and professes he wants to make it a common man's ministry. So when friends congratulated him on moving to a "powerful" ministry (power in

terms of keeping industry on tenterhooks about clearance for their projects), Mr Pilot said he wanted to make it a service-oriented ministry and not a "controlling" ministry.

In keeping with his philosophy that money not be wasted on foreign trips, Mr Pilot cried off going to Geneva for the meeting on the Basel Convention where he would have had to do some tight-rope walking since his predecessor was actually supporting import of recyclable wastes. Mr Pilot has also not gone for the meeting of the Commission on Sustainable Development in the US.

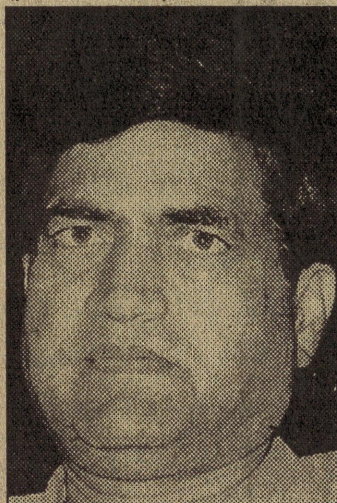
While the environmental issues involved may not have been important enough to send Mr Pilot scurrying abroad, there were political compulsions of the



Mr Kamal Nath

Chandraswamy kind to keep him home.

Mr Nath and Mr Pilot are astute politicians and the Environment Ministry a mere stepping stone in the power game. Neither has the kind of genuine concern for environment and wildlife that Mrs Maneka



Mr Rajesh Pilot

Gandhi displayed. Infact, since 1990 and the era of Mrs Maneka Gandhi, the power in the Ministry is wielded by politicians and not by scientists and bureaucrats.

Both would like to be good ministers. From the environmental elitism of the Kamal Nath kind to the populist

strategy of Pilot is indeed a far cry.

Whether Mr Pilot's stand comes from his own innate views or from the fiat of the Prime Minister to all ministries to play the populist card, is difficult to tell. But "populist" Mr Pilot is, though the corridors of the fourth floor of Paryavaran Bhawan are not cluttered (as in the earlier regime) with favour seekers from his constituency.

At the recent panchayat sammelan, Mr Pilot could be seen pandering to popular demand, unmindful of the conservation implications. He assured that rules that forbade people from cutting trees on their own land would be reviewed and revised; barren lands would be given to people's cooperatives to set up nurseries and grow trees; there would be a van mukhia in every panchayat to coordinate and bridge differences between forest officials and villagers; and he had written to chief ministers to take whatever steps necessary to stop

the Neelghai from destroying the poor farmers' crops.

Mr Pilot is keen to give awards to panchayats that grow the largest number of trees. He has written to the PWD, the road department and the railways that budgets for roads and railways include funds for tree cultivation.

Mr Nath was close to some NGOs. They had direct access to him and influenced him on protection of wildlife. So he set up the Global Tiger Forum and had a Protocol signed on protection of the tiger. However, he was not able to call a single meeting of the Indian Board for Wild Life.

Mr Pilot's statement that NGOs should not be in the driver's seat is indicative of a shift in the stand of the Ministry. But his proposal to the States to set up Environment Surveillance Cells to control poaching and illegal trade in wild life skins and bones is seen as an extension of his policing and intelligence operations of the Home Ministry.

The reward from the Centre for information on illegal activities in the protected areas is to be increased from Rs 5,000 to Rs 20,000 for Mr Pilot feels no worthwhile information would be given for paltry sums.

Mr Nath's plan to hand over degraded forest areas to industries for captive plantation of pulp and plywood trees has for all practical purposes been put in cold storage leading NGOs to heave a sigh of relief. Though Mr Pilot told this correspondent that the issue was being looked into by a group of ministers, in the Ministry he has told officials that degraded forest areas should go to tribal cooperatives.

While the former minister kept lamenting over the lack of resources for regenerating forests, Mr Pilot is trying to get forestry the same benefits that have been given to agriculture. He has asked for institutional

Continued on p 9 col 3

A different colour to green ministry

Continued from p 1 col 7

support on easy terms so that forestry becomes an industry. Bureaucrats and committees were hand-picked by Mr Nath so that he called the shots without let or hindrance. Mr Pilot is seeking to hand the Ministry back to the people. He has asked his officers to advise him courageously so that there is transparency in work. But Mr Pilot has barely six to seven months time. Is it time enough for the chameleon to change colours?

PM, Soz in different tones on forest policy

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Oct. 17

There is unbelievable double speak on the country's forest policy in the top rungs of the Government.

At his recent meeting with industrialists, Prime Minister I. K. Gujral assured industrialists, who for a decade have been casting their beady eyes on the degraded forest areas of the country for meeting their pulp and paper requirements, that the Environment and Forest Ministry will come out within a month with a forest policy that will meet the needs of local people, industry and environment.

Simultaneously he has asked Environment and Forest secretary Vishwanath Anand to prepare a note for the Cabinet in two days on the use of forest land for industrial purpose. Ironically, Environment and Forest Minister Saifuddin Soz was in Istanbul addressing the World Forestry Congress and extolling the vir-

tues of India's pro-people (not industry) forest policy.

Representatives of the paper industry have put in a strong bid for raising their requirements of raw material on the degraded forest lands. And Mr Gujral, totally ignorant of the battle that has been fought on this issue for a decade, has pushed the Ministry to begin the exercise all over again. This is despite the Supreme Court interim order banning non-forestry operations on forest lands.

Giving due importance to the 1980 Forest Conservation Act, the judges clarified that the word 'forests' included all forests — reserved, private, unclassified, council and even the 'judpi' jungles of Maharashtra. As a result of the court order mines and saw mills operating on forest land ground to a halt. Now the Ministry has been asked to prepare a note for the Cabinet on handing over degraded forest areas to industry.

It was during Dr Kamla Chowdhury's tenure as the chairperson

of the National Wasteland Development Board in the mid-eighties that the proposal was first mooted for handing over forest lands to industry. However, it was shot down.

Then the Ministry started in a big way the joint forest management programme by people living around forests and the forest department. After seven to eight years when the trees are harvested selectively in a protected area the people get a share of the harvested trees. The programme did extremely well in West Bengal and in some other States and got international recognition.

Simultaneously farm forestry was given a big boost. The pulp and paper mills in need of raw material would approach farmers who would grow the required poplars, eucalyptus, etc. for a price. The sapling for the plantation were provided by the companies. So farmers cultivated eucalyptus for the Viscos Company in Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu and in the Terai region of UP they grew poplars

for the match company WIMCO. Both are highly successful collaborative efforts.

But the industry's demand for degraded forest land surfaced again in a big way when Mr Kamal Nath was the Environment Minister. A kind of tripartite arrangement between forest corporations, local people and industry was worked out and a note was submitted to the Cabinet. Water Resources and Rural Department opposed it. Though an inter-ministerial committee was appointed on the issue, its report never materialised. The social audit panel appointed by Mr Rajesh Pilot, who succeeded Mr Kamal Nath as Environment Minister, also opposed handing over of degraded forest lands to industry. The audit panel was headed by Justice R. S. Pathak and had on it former Environment Secretary P. Rajamani.

In the context of the Ninth Plan discussion a committee headed by the Secretary, Rural Development, Mr N. C. Saxena, was appointed to look into

the issue.

The argument raised in support of the industry's demand is that over 24 per cent of the forest lands are degraded and Rs 310 billion would be needed over the next 25 years to restock them — money which the Government is unable to raise. Due to escalating biotic pressure (animal and human) the degradation of forests continues.

However, with political will at the top and some commitment at the forest level, just by closing a degraded forest area in three or four years it will bounce back, maintain forestors. So joint forest management is what people in the field want.

At the recent meeting of the Forest Secretaries and Principal Chief Conservators of Forests, most forestors opposed revision of the forest policy because it was pro-people. However some states, particularly those in the North East have been maintaining that they should be allowed to determine the use of their forests.

Highway project takes express route to see green light

PM pressurised Secy to clear Mumbai-Pune project

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Oct. 16

Breaking all norms on environmental clearance for projects, Prime Minister I. K. Gujral on Monday afternoon called up Environment and Forest Secretary Vishwanath Anand and bullied him to clear the controversial Rs 2,000 crore Mumbai-Pune Express Highway.

When Mr Gujral called the Secretary on the rax and wanted to know the status of the highway project, Mr Anand said the project was still under examination and a decision would be taken on it when Environment and Forest Minister Saifuddin Soz returned from Turkey where he is addressing the World Congress on Forestry.

The PM is believed to have been extremely angry and said as the Prime Minister he wanted the project cleared immediately. The Ministry then went into a huddle. A series of meetings were held and by 10.30 the same night, the Secretary had cleared the project.

Normally the final clearance is given by the Environment Minister. The project was also cleared

without being processed under the Forest Conservation Act.

Though Reliance had put in its bid for the construction of what is touted as India's first Express Highway at a cost of Rs 3,500 crore, it was rejected by the State Government which felt it could do it for less than Rs 2,000 crore.

Though Maharashtra Chief Minister Manohar Joshi had met Mr Soz on the project, the Minister — who has become a champion of sorts for the brutalised forests of India — had told Ministry officials that the project needed an indepth analysis. The project would affect some 60 hectares of forest land.

It had been opposed tooth and nail by Shyam Chainani and the Bombay Environment Action Group (BEAG) because the highway was to cut through the forest areas of Khandala rich in biodiversity. Instead of constructing a new highway, the BEAG suggested that the existing road be widened and made a six lane channel. This would cost just Rs 300 crore to 400 crore; the biodiversity would be saved and the heavy Mumbai-Pune traffic would flow smoothly.

A proposal for the study of the

biodiversity that could be affected was mooted. This was to be done by the Wildlife Institute (WLI). The Maharashtra Government initially wanted the Bombay Natural History Museum to do the study. But when BNHS director C. D. Deshmukh refused to blindly comply with Maharashtra's need for such a highway, they agreed to the WLI doing it.

Late in September, the State Government revised the project dropping the ghat section. But officials of the E&F Ministry insisted on an expert group review of the revised project. Additional Secretary K. Roy Paul rejected the suggestion. But he was over-ruled by the Minister who noted "what about the forest clearance." While the CM was putting his pressure, several others had apprised about the environmental dimensions

Now without the mandatory forest clearances and despite the guideline issued just a fortnight back by Mr Anand himself that environmental clearance may be given only after clearance under the Forest Conservation Act for projects on forest land, none other than the Prime Minister has got the project cleared.

Soz urged to save Gautam Puri animals

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Nov. 11
Dr Iqbal Malik, director of Vatavaran, has appealed to Environment and Forests Minister Saifuddin Soz, as well as Delhi Chief Minister Sahib Singh Verma to save the animals languishing in a hell hole called Gautam Puri, on the banks of the Yamuna, near ITO.

Some 20 elephants, 10 camels, 50 horses and 1,200 families live in this animal and human slum. All animals are kept tethered for long hours on short chains. The restraining chains used for the elephants have spikes on them. The situation of human beings is equally appalling.

Dr Malik, in her petition to the government, has pointed out that according to the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, it is an offence to keep any animal chained for an unreasonable period of time; more so if the tether is extremely short or very heavy.

Most of the animals, she says, have been kept there illegally as the owners do not have the mandatory ownership certificates. According to Section 42 of the Wildlife Protection Act, an ownership certificate is mandatory for any commercial dealing on wildlife.

So, when an elephant is bought, the owner needs to get an ownership certificate from the Chief Wildlife Warden of the region. If the elephant is brought to another State, his particulars need to be given to the Chief Wildlife Warden there within a month.

Dr Malik says the elephants have probably been trapped from the forests for sale at the Sonepur (Bihar) elephant *mela*, the biggest animal fair of Asia. At the *mela* they would easily fetch a price of Rs 8 lakh.

The animals kept at Gautam Puri are hired for marriage processions, children's parties or just for display. While horses are hired out for two to three hours for Rs 3,000 to Rs 10,000; elephants can be hired for just Rs 1,000 to Rs 2,500 per hour and camels for Rs 500 to Rs 800 per hour.

When not chained, the elephants walk on the hot tarmac roads, jostling for space with DTC buses and other vehicles. Breathing in the toxic emission of vehicles, these elephants have become listless and dull.

Psychological wrecks, their eyes are permanently watering and even their thick skins are developing early wrinkles. Since they came to live here 20 years ago, the elephants have been deprived of the joys of procreation. Not one of them has bred.

Hanumantha Rao panel report on Tehri dam

2-cr fund for rehabilitation mooted

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Nov. 13

The Hanumantha Rao Committee that looked into the rehabilitation and environmental aspects of the Tehri hydro electric project has recommended that the Tehri Hydro Development Corporation should create a special fund of Rs 2 crore to assist families whose lands have yet to be acquired.

To prevent infiltration of outsiders from buying/obtaining land and claiming rehabilitation benefits, the UP Government had issued a notification limiting transfer of lands. This restriction on sale of land has led to hardships in meeting expenses related to marriage, death and disease in some cases. All these people have sought financial assistance.

The experts have recommended cash and a residential plot as compensation to additional members of the families. In fact the benefits could continue right up to 2002.

After Sunderlal Bahuguna's long fast last year for a review of the Tehri project, the then Prime

Minister Deve Gowda had appointed two expert committees to look into 1) the rehabilitation and environmental aspects and 2) the safety of the dam in the highly seismic Himalayan belt. The second report, which is the more crucial one, has not yet been completed.

The Hanumantha Rao report says in all the Tehri power complex will affect a total of 37 villages fully and 88 villages partially and the Tehri town. Up to March 1997, the report says 2,064 rural families from 28 fully affected villages in the first phase, and 446 families from the second phase have been given rehabilitation provisions.

Since affected families want to be resettled mainly in Uttarakhand, efforts are on to acquire land in Dehradun district though the search for land has been extended to Haridwar district.

The rehabilitation package for Tehri project, though better than most of the packages evolved for other irrigation/hydel projects of the country, has left out major unmarried daughters and sons who are not recognised as separate

families for compensation. The committee has sought to rectify this lacuna.

In the case of those whose lands have not yet been acquired, the committee has recommended an advance—limited to 25 per cent of the cost of their land holdings or Rs one lakh—whichever is less. The advance will carry a 12 per cent interest rate.

All sons and unmarried daughters of the entitled, fully affected families who have turned 18 on July 19, 1990 are recognised as independent families eligible for rehabilitation provisions. Though the cut off date is supposed to be July 18 2002, this date can be extended if the compensation is not provided on time.

For newly recognised additional families of those in rural areas (who have received land compensation), the committee has recommended cash compensations—major married sons—Rs 150,000 and the major unmarried sons and daughters Rs 75,000. For residential plots Rs

3,300 or a 200 sq mt plot in a rehabilitation centre has been recommended for each major married son.

The committee has also recommended house construction assistance for urban families—this varies from Rs 60,000 for those allotted 60 sq mt plots and Rs 1.2 to Rs 1.8 lakh for those allotted bigger plots of 100 to 300 sq metres.

Even for shop owners who may have rented out their shops, the committee has recommended one constructed shop. For each additional shop owned by the person but not run by him, cash compensation of Rs 40,000 has been suggested.

In addition, the committee has recommended development of the rim of the reservoir as part of the catchment area treatment; construction of a ring road subject to environmental safeguards; development of micro watersheds in the catchment areas to be implemented by local people.

(To be continued)

Hanumantha Rao panel report on Tehri dam

Environmental viability not assessed

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Nov. 14 The Hanumantha Rao Committee has been extremely critical of the Government for giving environment clearance to projects before the necessary studies have been completed and the environmental viability of the project established.

The committee, which looked specially at the environmental safeguards of the Tehri Dam, has pointed out that 'the economic implications of implementing the required environmental safeguards must be fully assessed and taken into consideration while according economic clearance.'

to small patches but each of the micro water sheds, where there are patches of high erodibility.

Though some 293 sq kms of highly erodible forest area has already been treated, some of it might need to be retreated, says the report. The total cost of treatment of this catchment area has been estimated by the UP Forest Department is Rs 90 crore in addition to what has been spent. The committee has reiterated that treatment has to be *pari passu* with the engineering works.

The committee has also recommended the planting of a green belt along the rim of the reservoir with the help of local people to prevent soil erosion and flow of silt into the reservoir and an environmental cess on the power sold for environment protection and re-

generation works.

The experts have suggested the setting up of a monitoring committee, on the lines of the Narmada Control Authority, to ensure implementation of the conditions of clearance.

environmental studies have still not been satisfactorily completed, it was pointed out.

Some members of the expert committee have in fact stated that the project was neither properly assessed from the environmental angle, nor properly costed in terms of environmental and rehabilitation requirements, before clearance, albeit conditional, was accorded. Many of the required

The committee has therefore suggested that in future environmental clearance should be given only for a specified period — may be two years at a time. Project authorities must subsequently have the clearance renewed based on their record of compliance with environmental safeguards. Once the studies are completed, the economic and environmental viability of the project should be reassessed.

Only if found viable, should the project be allowed to proceed.

The committee has said the Environment Protection Act must be made more effective so that responsibility can be fixed and deterrent action taken against those who are responsible for not complying with the conditions of clearance.

The report carries an excellent

chart on the status of various action plans — catchment areas treatment, command area development and disaster management. In fact a disaster management plan was considered vital for a project that has been rocked by controversy about its safety. But the disaster management plan has still not reached the Environment and Forest Minister though the THDC says it has been submitted to the Agriculture Ministry.

A Bhagirathi Basin Management Authority was to have been set up through legislative action by March-end, 1991, later extended to December 1993. But it has not yet been set up.

The catchment area treatment has not been handled well. Some 740 sq kms of forest and non-forest land needs treatment. The committee has recommended treatment of the degraded areas — forest and non-forest — in the entire catchment of the Tehri project and not just in the 'directly draining' portion. The committee says these areas must be treated at project cost and the treatment should be completed before impoundment starts.

Catchment area treatment, it has said, should not be restricted the interest of people who still have high expectations from the party", Mr Chavan said.

On the proposed joint contact tours by the party leaders, including Mr Sitaram Kesri, Mr Sharad Pawar and Mr Madhavrao Scindia in the State, Mr Chavan said it

would be significant for the people to see all the leaders together demonstrating unity.

On the law and order situation in Maharashtra, Mr Chavan said "normally I do not criticise the State Government but the situation is really bad with crimes on the increase and open warfare by gangs".

Indeed, he noted, "what Governor P. C. Alexander is supposed to have said in Goa recently about law and order in Maharashtra is not altogether wrong".

Mr Chavan, who is chairman of the Parliamentary Ethics Committee, felt Government's policy of encounters was not the solution. "We are examining the politicisation of criminals and criminalisation of politics which are deeper aspects".

Mr Chavan lambasted the approval given by the State Cabinet to the Sahara India group's hill resort project in Pune district saying "Maharashtra Government has violated the protection given by the Government of India to *adivasis* and their lands, which have been taken over by the so-called agriculturists".

He said if the MPCC seeks his assistance, he will provide details of how lands on which *adivasis* based their livelihood had been taken over brazenly by the project promoters.

An agitational programme to protest the State Government's decision should be decided by the MPCC, he added.

Kharo Creek jetty project

Soz under pressure to give clearance

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Dec. 1 Environment and Forests Minister Saifuddin Soz is under tremendous pressure from within the ministry and from politically powerful persons outside the ministry to give environment clearance for the jetty being constructed by Sanghi Industries at Kharo Creek in Kutch district of Gujarat.

In the ministry, the note about the Gujarat High Court fiat (of July) to the Environment Ministry to take a decision on the jetty (without verifying whether it is on forest land) was put up to him a month late. Mr Soz feels that this was done deliberately to leave him with no choice but to concur with the decision of the bureaucrats. "If I had enough time I would straighten out this ministry and transfer several officers," he said.

Even while the minister was setting up an expert committee, under the chairmanship of Anil Agarwal of the Centre for Science and Environment, to look into the issue, four members of the Standing Committee of Parliament on Science and Technology, on their own took off to Sanghipura and released a report to the Press that the jetty should be permitted.

The Standing Committee was headed by Mr Gumman Mal Lodha (BJP) and other members were Mr Harivansh Sahay (SP), Mr J. N. Dass (CPI-M) and Mr

Ajit Kumar Mehta (JD). Two junior officers of the ministry accompanied the team. In fact they were at Sanghipuram a day before the Agarwal Committee.

Mr Soz has objected to the underhand manner in which the Parliamentary Committee operated. "Its constitution is illegal. I was kept in the dark while two officers of my ministry were associated with it," he told *The Hindustan Times*. But even a Parliamentary Committee cannot interfere in the day to day functioning of the ministry, he said.

Trying to soften Mr Soz, the politicians are telling him that Rs 750 crore has already been spent on the project and it would not be fair to pull the carpet at this stage. Many of those interested in the project are also approaching Dr Farooq Abdullah to speak to Mr Soz, his party member.

With the Prime Minister having resigned, Mr Soz is only a caretaker, but he would like to ensure that projects coming up in environmentally sensitive areas are cleared only after due scrutiny.

Mr Soz, however, has not got a clear verdict even from the Agarwal Committee. Two members, Pratibha Pande, a keen environmentalist earlier with Kalpavriksh, and B. C. Choudhury of the Wildlife Institute of India, have sent strong dissenting notes to Mr Soz. The key findings of the Agarwal Committee are that the creek-mangrove-mud flat-bet-

ecosystem, where the jetty is proposed, is part of an ecologically sensitive and important area which has suffered from less human interference than other mangrove ecosystem of the Gulf of Kutch.

Though the committee recognises the importance of mud flats as feeding ground of waders and wetland birds, it does not see a significant adverse impact on the Coastal Regulatory Zone (CRZ) area due to navigational activities. The implementation of jetty project, the committee feels, would not have an appreciable adverse impact on spawning and breeding of economically important fisheries.

The normal activities of the project, the report says, are unlikely to have an appreciable impact on the luxuriant mangroves on the opposite bank. However, certain project related activities such as chronic oil spill and bunkering have adverse but preventable effects.

In the Khautar project area, the committee in its two-hour visit saw just one chinkara but abundant rodent burrows and even spiny tailed lizard burrows. It also saw a black-capped kingfisher, which itself is a record. However, the literature for the region mentions sighting of desert cat, desert fox, Indian wolf, caracal, small Indian civt cat etc.

The committee has pointed out that according to a document submitted to the Environment Ministry some 20 companies want to ac-

quire land for production of cement and six have applied for plant sites in the Lakhpat and Abdasa talukas. All these companies may one day seek permission for construction of jetties, causing tremendous ecological stress to the coastal ecosystem. Agarwal has, therefore, suggested that the ministry should first treat the Sanghi project as part of a regional coastal zone management plan.

An elaborate monitoring system, to be financially supported by Sanghi Industries, has also been recommended so that the ecosystem does not suffer.

Ms Pratibha Pande and Mr Choudhury have pointed out that the Khautar project is in an ecologically fragile area that falls in CRZ-1 since it is both on forest land and involves an island. Ms Pande has said the construction of a jetty needs comprehensive safeguards which are difficult to provide.

She has also said that construction of a captive jetty so close to an international border (Pakistan) should be cleared by the Defence Ministry.

Mr Choudhury has in fact submitted on November 20 additional scientific information on the adverse impact of oil spills and expressed apprehension for the Kharo creek mangrove systems.

Mr Soz was supposed to report back to the Gujarat High Court on November 20. However, he has sought more time.

sal borer infestation

Shukla accuses M-P Govt of negligence

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Dec. 8

While the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests of Madhya Pradesh, Mr R. D. Sharma, sought to assure environmentalists that the cutting of 10 lakh sal trees in the State, infected by the deadly sal borer, would not decimate the forests, State Congress leader V. C. Shukla has dashed off letters to the Prime Minister, the Environment Minister and the Chief Minister accusing the State of neglecting the infestation. The infestation was first noticed in Mandla district in 1995.

The Sal Borer Crises Management Cell was set up in Bhopal only this Oct. when many more trees had been infected, he points out. It is sheer negligence by the State forest department that has created this avoidable and devastating spread of insect attack now being called an "epidemic", says Mr Shukla.

Mr Sharma admits that some 3 lakh hectares of sal forest have been affected in Mandla, Shahdol, Rajnandgaon, Bilaspur, Sarguja and Balaghat districts. It is like a

gangarene. To save the forests you have no choice but to cut the trees and remove the timber from the forests, he says.

Others from the forest department, who did not want to be identified, warned that the epidemic may be spreading to Bihar and Orissa. The sal borer infestation comes in cycles of 30 years. In 1924-26 some 60 lakh trees were infected in Mandla district. The epidemic reappeared in 1962-65 and now again it is here.

But environmentalists fear that in the pretext of cutting the infected trees there will be large scale vandalism of the forests and have demanded a proper monitoring of the trees cut and removed from the forests.

The State Government hopes to get 2.5 lakh cubic metres of timber and the same amount of firewood which it will sell for Rs 250 crore.

The Environment and Forest Ministry has appointed a committee headed by the Director General of Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education, to investigate the infestation and suggest remedial measures. Other members of the committee are the director of the Indian Institute of

Forest Management, the regional chief conservator of forests of the Government of India, both from Bhopal, the director of the Tropical Forest Research Institute, Jabalpur, senior entomologists of ICFRE, additional PCCF (research), Madhya Pradesh, and the managing director of the M-P Forest Corporation.

The Committee has been authorised to take immediate steps to assist the State Government. The Environment Minister has also written to Chief Minister Digvijay Singh to increase the allocation for the forestry sector from the existing one per cent of the State budget to at least five per cent. Among the causes for such an epidemic is the paucity of funds for management of natural forests, he has said.

Wildlife tour organisers are extremely worried that like the malaria and plague epidemics, the sal borer will keep off tourists from Kanha National Park, also in Mandla district.

Mr R. D. Sharma said it would be foolish to think that Kanha has not been affected when sal trees in the district have been affected. However, there were no immedi-

ate plans to cut trees in Kanha and the park would remain open, he assured.

Mr V. C. Shukla has said an independent Central inquiry should be held to fix responsibilities for the negligence. In fact the institutes that he has suggested to the Prime Minister for the inquiry are all outside Madhya Pradesh. How can you expect forester from the State to fix responsibility for their own negligence, he asks.

Mr Sharma, however, points out that it is difficult to tackle the sal borers. They are inside the tree for 11 months and outside it for just 40 days. Before they die they lay some 400 to 500 larvae.

It is only when the sal trees start oozing resin, a natural defence mechanism to combat the borers, that there are visible signs of infestation. The other signs are the browning of the crowns of the trees, branches falling off and mounds of fine wood dust collecting at the base of the affected trees. The worst affected are the old trees with enormous girth. They lack the vigour and the capacity to produce the resin to fight the borer attack.

Pilot reconstitutes environment panels

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Dec 21: With barely four-and-half months to go for the expiry of the tenure of the old expert committees for environment impact assessment, Mr Rajesh Pilot, Minister for Environment and Forests, has reconstituted the committees. Former Secretaries to the Government head three of the five new committees and a sizable representation has been given for people from Rajasthan as well as for Jats, Yadhavs and even a Gujjar.

However, his selection of Mr Madho Singh Dewan, engineer and ex-minister of Rajasthan, as chairman of the expert committee for mining projects is bound to draw flak. A major environmental problem of Rajasthan is large-scale mining even in sensitive, fragile areas like Sariska and having a former Minister from the state as head of the expert committee does not augur well for the state's environment. Five of the 13 members on the mining committee are from the state — Dr Karan Singh Yadav, prof and head of SMS Medical College, Jaipur, Dr K S Gupta, Associate

Professor, Department of Chemistry, Rajasthan University, Dr S S Dhabria, Birla Research Institute, Rajasthan who has been involved in protecting the Aravali ranges and Mr Bhagwan Das Meena, retired railway engineer.

Mr Pilot has personally selected the chairmen of all the committees. Mr P M Abraham, chairman of the expert committee on industry, worked as Secretary, Transport, when Mr Pilot headed the Ministry. Ms Anna Malhotra heads the committee for river valley and hydro-electric projects and Mr R Vasudevan former Secretary, Power, the committee for thermal power plants. The latter's appointment has also caused some consternation for in his previous avatar he was in fact pushing projects which he will now have to gauge from the environmental angle. Mr Sanat Mehta, former chairman of the Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam Ltd, heads the expert committee for infrastructural development and miscellaneous projects. This committee will give the green signal for development of ports,

harbours, highways and jetties.

Though the committees on the whole are more professional not enough representation has been given to environmental activists that have been voicing public concern. In fact there are just four members on the five committees that could be called activists — Mr Shyam Chainani of the Bombay Environmental Action Group, Mr Bittu Sehgal, Mr Valmik Thapar and Mr Gautam Vohra.

Mr Pilot, unlike his predecessor, does not have many journalists on the committees. Just Praful Bidwai has been appointed on the river valley and hydro-electric projects committee. Mr Jairam Ramesh, Adviser, Planning Commission, who presents economic news for one of the TV networks is also on the same committee.

There are just five women on the expert committees — Ms Anna George, Ms Amita Baig of INTACH, Ms Asha Rajvanshi of the Wildlife Institute, Ms Nandita Krishna, CPR Centre, Madras and Ms Nalini Bhat, Additional Director, Ministry of Environment and Forests.

Forest official's nomination kicks up row

No head to keep country's forest wealth

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Dec. 30

The Environment and Forest Ministry has been without an Inspector General of Forests for over a month. Balwinder Singh, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF), Meghalaya, the only name forwarded to the Appointments Committee of Cabinet (ACC).

Finding that the name had been forwarded without the vigilance clearance, fax messages were sent to Meghalaya and a routine check of Mr Singh's record showed that the man who was to be put in charge of the country's forest wealth had two cases pending against him.

Mr Singh has been charged with illegal felling of trees ranging between 50,000 and 1.25 lakh, valued at over Rs 100 crore, in the reserve forests and buying of 200 sq kms of land instead of 350 sq kms for re-

building forest corridors for elephant migration. Rs 3 crore had been provided for the purchase.

Though a one-man committee has been appointed to look into the complaints, for Mr Singh the race to the top has had an ugly finish.

Trying desperately to resolve the issue, the Department of Personnel was consulted and various Supreme Court judgments on such a ticklish issue were referred to. Now in all probability Mr C. P. Oberoi, PCCF, in the Andamans and second in the selection committee list in seniority, is likely to be made Inspector General of Forests.

Ironically when the file was with Environment and Forest Minister Jai Narain Prasad Nishad, Mr Oberoi represented that he was senior to Mr Balwinder Singh in the civil list.

While some sources in the Ministry maintain that the civil list was revised in October and Mr

Balwinder Singh had given two extra marks to push him into first position, a spokesman for the Minister's office maintained that in initial recruitment as well as in the subsequent evaluation, Mr Singh was "senior." In a corner of the civil list published by the Government is a statement, "not deemed to have official sanction for seniority," the Minister's office stated. Those in the race had to have 30 years experience and at least two more years in the service.

It is also ironical that the vigilance inquiry against Mr Singh should have been sought only at the ACC level. The Meghalaya Government seems to have had no qualms about retaining the services of a man who had two serious charges pending against him and even gave the initial clearance for his appointment as IGF.

Mr Singh, Mr Oberoi as well as Mr Chitrapu, the PCCF from Tamil Nadu, the three officers whose names were considered for

the top job are ex-Army officers of the 1969 batch who were given five years seniority for their defence service.

Because of the condition that they should have two years service left to qualify, all of them automatically supersede the additional IGF's S. C. Dey and S. K. Pandey, 1960 and 1965 batch officers, who are currently with the Ministry. While IAS officers can be appointed Cabinet Secretary, the senior-most post in that cadre, with just six months to retire, for the top job in the forest service a minimum of two years additional service is required. This too has created some heart burn.

All this ugly bickering for the top job in the forest service is occurring at a time when the Supreme Court has put its weight behind the 1980 Forest Conservation Act and in an interim order banned movement of timber from the North East and mining on forest lands.

Adopt green charter, WWF urges parties

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI, Dec. 30

A Green Charter that all political parties can draw from for their election manifesto has been put out by the World Wide Fund for Nature, India.

The two-page Green Charter has been sent to all former Prime Ministers, those determining the political destinies of the nation and other influential sections of the population.

"Protection of the environment is crucial for human survival and well being now and in the future," the WWF charter states. "It is only through careful stewardship of the Earth's resources — air, water, land, flora and fauna — that we can advance towards national ecological security as well as achieve the goals of food, drinking water and work for all."

For development with equity, renewable resources have to be used responsibly; those that cannot be renewed have to be protected and safeguarded and over consumption of all resources curtailed.

Major factors for the worsening environment of the country, spelt out in the Charter, are exponential growth of the human population and spiralling conditions of poverty along with the ever increasing

industrial and commercial pressures on the natural resources.

WWF would like priority to be given to curbing greed and ostentation so that genuine livelihood needs of the poor are met.

It would like the Environment and Forest Ministry to be developed into a Ministry for Ecological Security, giving utmost attention to protection of the basic life-support systems of land, water, bio-diversity, forests and the atmosphere.

WWF has spelt out a multi-pronged strategy for people's participation in nature conservation and sought special attention for promotion of eco-technologies in agriculture, industry and the service sector.

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Wildlife India, US sign research deal

Exchange may cost India dear

By Usha Rai

NEW DELHI: The premier Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, has wittingly or unwittingly signed a research contract with the United States Department of Agriculture that could result in the country's invaluable biodiversity being patented and used in the United States.

Exactly a year ago a research project titled "Management of Forests in India for Biological Diversity and Forest Productivity — an Ecosystem Perspective" was worked out under the US India Fund Research Grant Programme. A whopping Rs 9,690,000 has been provided for research over the next five years. Another Rs 3,65,000 provided for international travel of Indian and US scientists associated with the research.

Though the project has the approval of the Ministry of Finance, a senior official of the Ministry of Environment and Forests — under which the Institute functions — stated quite categorically that it had not cleared the project.

What has set the alarm bells ringing, however, are clauses 12 and 15 of the provisions applicable to foreign agricultural research grants funded by the Americans. Clause 12 on patent and licence rights says "any patentable results which develop from research under this grant must be made available to the public in the United States. The Deputy Administrator will determine how this will be done. In countries other than the US, the grantee institution may secure patents on the results from this research, but the US Government must be granted a worldwide, nonexclusive, irrevocable, royalty-free licence to use the

patent for the US Government purpose."

Clause 15 says "upon request the grantee will provide the US Department of Agriculture with seeds, plants, vaccines or any other such research material discovered or developed during the life of the grant."

Fears have been expressed that 1) the patenting will create restrictions on utilisation of biodiversity by India and 2) the value addition will have to be borne by India. This means that if India wants to use a part of an Indian plan patented in the US, we will have to pay a fee to the Americans to use it. In other words Indian biodiversity will not be available to India without paying a price to a foreign Government.

India's tropical forests as everyone knows are a storehouse of biodiversity. The recorded biological wealth of India is 47,000 plants and 81,000 species of animals. There is no record of the country's enormous wealth of micro organisms which are in great demand for biotechnology. Last year Ashish Kothari of the Indian Institute of Public Administration had reported the patenting of 29 Indian micro organisms, just picked off the soil, in America.

Present at the discussions held on Oct. 31 and Nov. 1, last year at the WII, Dehradun, were Dr P. C. Tyagi of the IGNFA, Mr V. B. Sawarkar, Mr S. Kumar, Dr P. K. Mathur, Mr Sugato Dutt, Mr Ajai Saxena, Mr B. C. Choudhury and Mr H. S. Pabla from the Institute and Dr James R. Stevenson, Mr G. K. Gupta and Mrs Usha Kapur for the US Department of Agriculture. The research project with the Americans has been signed by the director of WII, Mr S. K. Mukherji.

Felling a fallacy

A gutsy bunch, the women officers of the Indian Forest Service are doing their best to protect our heritage, says Usha Rai

DEEP in the jungles of India, fighting the illegal extraction of timber and fuelwood, protecting wildlife and desperately seeking to balance forest conservation and protection with the increasing demands of tribals and villagers for fuel, fodder and minor forest resources, are the women forest officers.

Unlike the Kiran Bedis of other services they have kept away from the arc lights and not many people—not even those in the environment and women's movement—know that there are currently 72 of them in the country. They form a fraction of the 2576 forest officers but maintain with pride that they are not IAS rejects.

Most of them are first class students from the science stream (one has even done her Ph.D in ecology from Lucknow University) who have chosen the forest service because of their love for nature and forests and a sense of commitment to conservation.

A national convention on forestry, sustainable development and role of the women forest officers brought them together for the first time and they were chaffing about the apathetic treatment given to a service which attracts people with commitment to nature. Despite the parity at the entry point, the subsequent disparities in the pay structure and promotional prospects have projected the Indian Forest Service as the third choice.

For a country that has pushed women into various areas of specialisation long before many developed countries, we have been slow in opening up the forestry sector. It was only in 1980, after new parameters for recruitment of women forest officers were worked out that Ms Ramalakshmi, Ms Veena Sekhri and Ms Meera Agarwal from Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh respectively became the pioneering women of the forest service.

Says Ms Gopa Pandey, associate professor at the Indira Gandhi National Forest Academy, Dehra Dun, while the men had to run 25 kms in four hours to qualify, women had to cover 15 kms in the same time; the required height for males (163 cms) was lowered to 150 cms for women; the chest size for men was 80 cms and 85 cms (after expansion) — for women it was made 75 and 80 cms.

All this has facilitated the entry of women officers. But in

most states the parameters for recruitment of forest guards or range officers remain the same for men and women. The result is that less than a percentage of the subordinate ranks—in fact just 150 are women.

The women, however, are still fighting for recognition as equal to their male colleagues. In many states women foresters are still given 'soft' desk jobs. Many of them are asked to draw up 10-year forestry management plans though they have no experience of ground reality.

Field postings in protected national parks and reserved forests, which most of them long for, are denied to women in Karnataka, Kerala, Orissa, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.

After Ms Vandana Malik (IPS) was shot dead in the North East, recruitment of women to all three services has decelerated in the region. Other single woman changed their cadre. But Ms Ranjana Gupta stayed on in the North East.

So are there any Kiran Bedis among the women foresters? Ms Vijay Lakshmi was district forest officer in Pangri, near Doda in Himachal Pradesh, and at an altitude 13,500 feet had to cover two routes, over 52 kms of the most inaccessible terrain on foot. It was seen as a punishment posting because no development wing of the government operated in this region. But there was no one singing paeans to her pioneering effort.

Ms Rebecca Nayar was a terror when she had a field job in Bhanjanagar in Orissa district. The result: Several MLAs complained against her and she was eased out on to a desk job. Once when she raided a saw mill, the owner released a herd of bulls to distract her.

Ms Mita Bisal raided a train and seized a truckload of fuelwood that had been illicitly felled. At Sihar, dominated by Madhya Pradesh forest dons, another women forester had the guts to confiscate 10 cartloads of illicit teak on a midnight raid.

"We are protecting the unlocked wealth of the reserve forests and are forced to deny villagers their requirement of fuelwood and fodder. But we do feel the pulse of the people and are sympathetic to their requirements. We have no power to give anything to poor. Not unless tribal development and rural development are vested with the forester," says Ms Pandey.

On the brink of a Himalayan blunder

Given our high rate of dam failure, a review of the Tehri dam is essential, says Usha Rai

SUNDERLAL Bahuguna is no ordinary man. All his life he has traversed the Himalayas championing the cause of environment, clad in a simple kurta pyjama, with a bandana wrapped around his almost snow white hair. Clean air, sparkling, unpolluted waters and the importance of afforestation are the burden of his song.

For 10 years he has been battling against the Tehri Dam and the enormous dangers of building a 265 metre high dam, bang on a seismic gap where experts have predicted major earthquakes of intensity upto 8.5 points on the Richter scale.

Two years ago when the National Environment Council, the highest body on environmental issues, was formed to advise the Prime Minister, Bahuguna was appointed a member. But today when the same man is slowly wasting away (he has been on a fast for over a month) the Prime Minister has no time for him.

Hell built on completing Tehri dam, the government is not willing to listen to seismologists or even to that Superpower who sent a warning in the form of the Uttarkashi earthquake of 1991 and the more recent disaster at Kobe.

Interestingly enough the January issue of the journal, *International Water, Power and Dam Construction* brought out by the International River Networks carries a statement from the Union Power Minister, Mr N K P Salve — "We are not going in for large dams any more. We want run of the river projects and smaller dams which will not cause any impediment to environmental needs."

Mr Owen Lammers, executive director of International Rivers Network, has reminded Mr Salve of his statement in a letter dated June 8.

In 1993 presentations on Tehri were made to the Prime Minister, Mr Narasimha Rao, by the secretaries for environment, power and water resources. The environment secretary expressed doubts about the dam safety and pointed out that the conditionalities on which the environment clearance was given, remained.

Dr Vinod Gaur, secretary, Ocean Development, and an expert on seismology who was present at the meeting, had an altercation with the Water Resources Secretary, Mr Thatte.

Mr Rao, who was totally confused by the presentations, asked Dr Gaur for his comments. "If I have to answer submissions made by Mr Thatte I will have to relearn my physics," he stated. The issue remained unresolved.

At the seminar on 'earthquakes and large dams in the Himalayas' organised by INTACH, seismologists pointed out that Tehri dam was underdesigned for the 'peak ground acceleration' that an earthquake measuring about 8 on the Richter scale could trigger off. This information too was forwarded to Mr Rao.

Both the Sunil Roy committee of 1985 and the Standing Committee of the River Valley Projects, headed by Dr Bhumla in 1990, rejected the project on safety, environment, rehabilitation and cost/benefit analysis. In 1991 the Committee of Secretaries appointed an expert committee which cleared the project but with a dissenting note from Dr V Gaur. Then another committee was appointed, headed by Mr Jai Krishan, former Roorkee University vice-chancellor and a consultant to Tehri, and the project was cleared. Environmentalists, however, claimed that Mr Krishan had a vested interest in the project.

While it is true that crores of rupees have already been spent on the project and a number of people of Tehri township relocated, purely on seismology, a review is needed. Why can't we admit our mistakes and back off before the dam washes away many small towns?

India's rate of dam failure is among the highest in the world. Twenty-seven dams have failed and currently another 33 have structural and hydrological defects according to the Central Water Commission. Is that not proof enough for a relook at Tehri?

The Kaddam dam, Andhra Pradesh, constructed 1957 failed in 1958; the Machhu 11, Gujarat, constructed 1972, failed 1979; Sampna, Madhya Pradesh, constructed 1956, failed 1964; Nawgaon, Madhya Pradesh, constructed 1958, failed 1959; Kedernala, Madhya Pradesh, constructed 1964, failed 1964; Panshet, Maharashtra, constructed 1961, failed 1961; Kodeganar, Tamil Nadu, constructed 1977, failed 1977.

Must we add to these dire statistics?

Tigers on the run in MP reserves

by Usha Rai

NEW DELHI

HAS Madhya Pradesh jumped the gun in declaring itself a Tiger State? Despite the Chief Minister, Mr Digvijay Singh, and the Environment and Forest Minister, Mr Kamal Nath's efforts to promote Madhya Pradesh as the premier tigerland of the country - with almost 900 big cats, about a fourth of the country's tiger population - the special status seems misplaced. The forest cover of the State is shrinking, diamond and white sandstone mining is unabashedly eating into the tiger reserves, and poachers are having a field day. In the last eight to nine months, some 3,000 hectares of forests

have been diverted for mining in Chhindwara, Sarguja, Bilaspur and Siddhi. While wanting to corner the glory for saving the tiger, the State Government does not know how to draw the line between environmental conservation and development that would bring in quick money.

Going by the record number of tigers being killed, by 2008 the king of the jungles will have been exterminated from the wilds of Madhya Pradesh, warns Mr P.V. Rajagopal, Inspector-General of Police heading the Tiger Cell at the police headquarters in Bhopal. If Mr Rajagopal sounds like a prophet of doom, it is with good reason. From the end of January to the end of June, when tiger vigilance was stepped up, some 54 leopard skins and 25 tiger skins, have been seized along with nails and bones.

Poachers are having a field day in Balaghat, Mandla, Seoni, Bastar and Chhindwara districts. The exquisite Kanha National Park falls partially in Balaghat and Mandla districts. The killings occur not in the protected areas, but in the corridors to Kanha, says Mr Rajagopal.

Since a bullet hole would reduce the price of a skin, tigers are being poisoned or electrocuted. Live wires are deliberately placed on the path of tigers. Small bunds or tanks are constructed on forest streams from which tigers drink and the water poisoned with aldrin, a local pesticide that is readily available.

Mr Rajagopalan said that recently the skins of a tigress and two cubs, with bullet holes in the skins of the latter, were seized. The poacher said he had to shoot

the six-month-old cubs because they would not leave the tigress, which had been poisoned to death.

But the recent collaboration between police and the Forest Department has led to the arrest of 150 people for poaching. While the poaching and trading of skins is masterminded in the towns, the execution is left to adivasis and other poor forest dwellers, who have no great stake in saving the tiger.

Early last month, the kingpin of the poachers, Siyar Shukla, was caught at Mandla. A decoy customer paid Rs 5 lakh in cash for 21 tiger skins. But the police arrived before he could fetch the skins from his godown. Using a combination of laws, including the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, none of those arrested have been allowed bail.

As the chase heats up, the poachers are becoming more wary. Two tiger skins were found hidden between parallel walls in a mud hut. It was only after the first wall was broken that the skins could be found.

The Tiger Cell has also discovered that villagers have little sympathy for the king of the jungles. The inadequate compensation (Rs 5,000) when the tiger picks up a milch animal, and the red tape and delay in payment, have turned villagers against the tiger.

In fact they would rather connive with poachers and get Rs 1 lakh for every tiger poisoned, and in the process save their cattle. The head of poaching operations in the State gets Rs 10 lakh for a tiger, while in Bombay it sells for nearly Rs 20 lakh. In

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More power projects near eco-sensitive areas feared

Move to ease guidelines for new power plants

by Usha Rai

NEW DELHI

WHILE on the one hand concern is being expressed over the increasing pollution in the country, on the other hand there are moves afoot in the Environment and Forest Ministry to relax guidelines for setting up thermal power plants in the vicinity of metropolitan cities, national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and ecologically-sensitive areas.

A meeting of the Environmental Appraisal Committee for thermal power plants was held recently to review the existing guidelines that limit

the setting of these polluting power plants to 25 kms from cities and ecologically-sensitive areas.

Three members of the expert committee, Mr Shyam Chainani of the Bombay Environmental Action Group, Mr Brijendra Singh, a wildlife expert, and Ms Sorali Bhagwati have dissented, Mr Chainani, in fact, stormed out of the meeting and later, along with Mr Brijendra Singh, sent in his dissenting note. With the experience of the Indraprastha and Badarpur power plants still fresh in their memory, they were not willing to compromise or dilute the guidelines.

Though the proposal for relaxation in exceptional cases after critically examining the

relevant environmental issues, these experts fear it would be the thin end of the wedge for the mushrooming growth of power plants in sensitive areas. What is more, the Committee did not even discuss how much closer to the cities and parks these thermal power projects can be set up.

The Central Electricity Authority (CEA) as well as the NTPC have been repeatedly putting pressure to relax the guidelines on the distance from metropolitan areas and national parks. In January 1991 too the proposal to dilute the guidelines was discussed but later dropped.

When the committee met again to review the guidelines a little over a month ago, despite the dissent of three members, the

proposal has been pushed through but with a proviso that relaxation should be permitted only in the case of thermal power plants using gas-based technology and other newer, cleaner technologies like the fluidised bed technology (CFB) used by the controversial Dabhol power project.

The thermal power appraisal committee sees these concessions as incentive for cleaner technologies. For coal-based power plants the 25 kms limit will hold good, an official of the Environment and Forest Ministry said. Now the ball is in the court of Environment and Forest Minister Kamal Nath.

In his dissenting note, Mr Chainani has said: "to accept the

proposal would be disastrous since project proponents would urge exemption in every case."

In 1990 the CEA representative raised the same point, and a sub-committee was appointed to examine the relaxation of the 25 kms guideline in depth. The sub-committee unanimously decided to maintain the prescribed distance of 25 kms. However, in the case of the gas-based thermal power projects, it was agreed that a reduction of 15 kms from the outer peripheries of metropolitan cities could be considered subject to the condition that the stack emission of NOX will not exceed 50 ppm, if environmental conditions so warrant.

The sub-committee also suggested that CEA and NTPC should initiate studies in different geo-climatic regions by adopting suitable technology which may limit NOX emission to 50 ppm. The Environment Ministry was also asked to initiate studies on the impact of gas-based power projects on forests and wildlife. Till the studies are completed, it said, the status quo on guidelines should be maintained.

Mr Chainani pointed out that in the last four years no studies had been initiated by CEA, NTPC or the Ministry on the environmental impact on forests and wildlife due to location of thermal power plants. "Nothing has changed to warrant a review."