

Defence projects may be exempt from green nod

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The Centre is considering removing defence projects from the Union environment ministry's purview, officials aware of the matter said. This means such projects like building of roads in areas of strategic importance will not be appraised for their environmental impact and will no longer require environmental and forest clearances if a proposal to the effect is accepted, they added.

Projects of strategic importance currently need prior environmental and forest clearances although their details are not put in the public domain because of security concerns. The details of regular projects are publicised and people are allowed to submit their feedback. Public hearings are also held for people affected by such projects to get an opportunity to understand them and give their consent.

R P Gupta, the environment ministry secretary, underlined there is no formal policy yet and the idea of exempting defence projects from prior clearances is at a conceptual stage. "We are waiting for a formal decision. All defence projects will be covered. The feeling in some quarters is that information on strategic projects should not get into the public domain," said Gupta.

The proposal comes even as India is seeking to reinforce its border infrastructure, particularly along the frontier with China. This infrastructure development is seen to be among the reasons for recent tensions with China, which escalated when 20 Indian soldiers were killed in a clash with Chinese troopers in Ladakh on June 15.

"The new guidelines are in draft stage...", said a defence ministry spokesperson, without offering more details.

Environmental activists are concerned that a policy of exempting defence projects from green clearances could lead to environmental degradation in ecologically fragile and biodiversity-rich border areas mainly in the Eastern and Western Himalayas. They say it means defence projects along disaster-prone areas, coasts, dense forests in Arunachal Pradesh and Kashmir will not be scrutinised.

Kanchi Kohli, a legal researcher with New Delhi's Centre for Policy Research, said this will send out signals that sectors like mining or highways can argue their way out of environmental scrutiny citing strategic or national interest. "There are already minimal public disclosures of the environmental scrutiny of defence projects. This decision would mean ecological expertise will not be a part of safeguarding critical defence infrastructure including naval bases or high altitude stations located in biodiverse habitat."

Activists also cite the example of the 880-km Chardham all-weather highway for the pilgrimage to four religious sites in Uttarakhand. As per the Border Roads Organisation's submission to the National Green Tribunal in 2018, the highway is of "strategic importance" even as it covers areas that are extremely fragile and prone to landslides.

Citizens of Green Doon (CGD), a civil society organisation, moved NGT in 2018 saying the highway has not undergone an environmental impact assessment (EIA) and pleaded that its cumulative impact be assessed first.

The environment ministry, in its response to the organisation's petition, submitted that only new national highways and expansion of those longer than 100 km need to get prior environmental clearance. The highway has been broken into several parts, each shorter than 100 km.

NGT formed an expert panel for a rapid EIA and to come up with an environmental management plan after studying issues like slope stabilisation and disaster management. Unhappy with the panel's terms of reference, CGD moved the Supreme Court last year.

The Supreme Court in August 2019 formed another high-powered committee with representatives from ministries of defence and environment as well as the Wildlife Institute of India. The committee was asked to do a cumulative EIA of the highway and consider whether revision of the project is needed to minimise its adverse impact on the environment. The committee is yet to submit its report.

Mallika Bhanot, a member of Uttarakhand-based Ganga Ahvaan, a civil society organisation, said the Chardham project entails road widening along fragile Himalayan stretches in violation of the Union road transport ministry's 2018 circular, which proposed narrow roads in the hills to prevent extensive environmental damage. According to Bhanot, the construction is underway and some slope cutting was done recently even after the Supreme Court's high powered committee took charge.

"A small section of the highway, under this project comes in the vicinity of border roads. Thus it is important to make roads that are safe for the movement of pilgrims and for the military too."

Bhanot said since the road widening has started, tree felling, slope instability; have activated several landslides along the Chardham route and created fatal bottlenecks. "Such a road thus will be unsafe for movement, disastrous in future and counterproductive to border security."

Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/defence-projects-may-be-exempt-from-green-nod/story-uXefbXOEP28YxNbB7LTsrO.html>