

No consensus on land Bill at all-party meet

Despite Rural Development Minister Jairam Ramesh's desperate efforts, no consensus could be arrived at on the Land Acquisition Bill in the all-party meeting today.

The government is keen to introduce the Bill in the current session of Parliament. However, with most political parties still not on board, the government has had to send the draft of the proposed legislation to various leaders and meet them again on March 20.

The bone of contention is the 180-odd amendments that the rural development ministry has suggested. According to opposition parties, many changes will make the Bill a completely different document from the one passed by the standing committee. The Bill had been tabled in the Lok Sabha at the end of the previous session, but could not be taken up as opposition members protested against tabling the Bill in such a hurried manner.

Today, Ramesh informed the leaders that the amendments have come down to 28.

Senior Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) functionaries — including Sushma Swaraj, Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha; and Arun Jaitley, Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, who attended the all-party meet — have said agricultural land that can yield three crops must not be allocated for industrial purposes. BJP leaders also want the recommendations of the standing committee to be accepted by the government.

As opposition MPs were still unsatisfied, Ramesh and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kamal Nath said the Bill's copies will be sent to all political parties tonight. "All parties can study the Bill and come up with their suggestions in the next meeting on March 20," they said.

Samajwadi Party (SP) chief Mulayam Singh Yadav said that while population growth was putting more pressure on land, multi-crop agricultural land should not be used for housing and other non-agricultural purposes.

Sharad Yadav (Janata Dal-United), too, voiced these sentiments and said fertile agricultural land should not be acquired for housing and industrialisation.

The Left parties have also objected to the draft legislation in its current form. Basudeb Acharia of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M), said, "This makes it a fit case for referring the legislation to the Standing Committee or the Select Committee, which can study these amendments and submit a report to the House in the ongoing Budget session itself, after the break."

Another CPI(M) leader, Sitaram Yechury, also said the Land Bill "needed to be either redrafted or a substantial number of amendments would have to be moved".

While most parties were in favour of sending the Bill back to the Standing or Select Committee, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) said it was opposed to it. TMC's Sudip Bandhopadhyay said, "We support the recommendations of the Standing Committee. Let us not waste time in sending back and forth the Bill to a committee."

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