

Ladakh State Board for Wildlife rejects report of sub-committee on settlement of boundaries in protected areas of Ladakh

L-G directs settlement of rights and claims of local communities in these protected areas within two months



Leh, September 12: In a development that will have far-reaching implications and offer relief to the local communities, Lieutenant Governor, Shri Vinai Kumar Saxena, has directed the completion of the settlement of rights and claims of local communities in three protected areas of Ladakh – Hemis National Park, High Altitude Cold Desert (Changthang) Wildlife Sanctuary and

Karakoram (Nubra–Shyok) Wildlife Sanctuary – within two months. This will pave the way for a lawful and participatory process for finalising their boundaries, particularly in the newly created districts.

The direction was issued during the 16th Meeting of the newly constituted State Board for Wildlife (SBWL), UT Ladakh, chaired by the Lieutenant Governor, on Friday. One of the key agenda items of the Board meeting was the consideration of the sub-committee report on finalization of the boundaries of these three protected wildlife areas.

The decision is expected to bring long-awaited clarity and certainty to local communities, who have been seeking clarity regarding the boundaries of the protected areas and recognition of their longstanding settlements, habitations and traditional rights.

It has been the demand of the local people that settlements and human habitations have existed for a very long time in these areas, which clearly fall outside the purview of the wildlife sanctuary. However, the earlier formed sub-committee included all these areas.

The erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir government had issued a preliminary notification of the boundaries of these sanctuaries in 1987. However, the Board, while deliberating threadbare on the final notification of the three protected areas, noted that the notification issued by the erstwhile

Government of Jammu and Kashmir had not correctly mapped the boundaries of the protected areas on the ground.

LG Shri Saxena, during the Board meeting, observed that the statutory process prescribed under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, for settlement of rights of individuals and communities residing in the proposed protected areas, has not been undertaken by the Committee. He noted that this process was not initiated and that the delineation of boundaries was carried out through a table-top exercise, without adherence to the legal framework. This rendered the exercise inconsistent with the provisions of the Act, inequitable to affected communities, and susceptible to legal challenges.

The Board observed that several of the areas included in the sub-committee report are of strategic importance and relate to national security, and the mandatory defence considerations were not duly factored into the report of the sub-committee. Shri Saxena also observed that the international boundaries, as depicted in the Survey of India maps, have not been taken as a reference point, which is essential while determining the limits of any protected area.

Accordingly, taking a serious note of the discrepancies, L-G Shri Saxena directed that the report of the sub-committee be set aside.

The Board also directed the designated DCs /Settlement Officers to resume the process of public hearings and to complete the proceedings within a period of two months.

Shri Saxena urged the people to come forth with their claims and titles of land and traditional rights, including those on pasture lands, to enable the administration to arrive at a fair decision on the boundaries of these protected areas. The Board noted that an early completion of the settlement process would be of great significance to local communities, as it would bring greater clarity, certainty and recognition to their bona fide rights in these protected areas. At the same time, it would also provide a clearer framework for wildlife conservation and development activities within these landscapes.

The Board, in its meeting, also ratified 23 important projects and sent them to the Standing Committee of the National Board of Wildlife, Government of India, for clearance. These included proposals relating to power transmission infrastructure in strategically important border areas, defence infrastructure and other essential projects in the Karakoram and Changthang areas.

The meeting was attended by Chief Secretary, UT Ladakh, Ashish Kundra; Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Chief Wildlife Warden, S. Rajesh, IFS; members of the State Board for Wildlife; senior officers of the UT Administration; and officers of the Department of Forest, Wildlife, Ecology and Environment.