

Centre to Fund 75% of NREGA Admin Reforms in Maoist Areas



DEVIKA BANERJI
NEW DELHI

The Centre will bear 75% of the cost required to overhaul the administrative capacity in the 72 districts most affected by Left-wing extremism, or Maoism, to make its flagship rural employment guarantee programme a success.

Rural development minister Jairam Ramesh told ET that the central assistance will be available under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) for a period of 10 years. In the rest of the districts, the Centre will continue to provide 6% financial assistance, a measure initiated in 2009.

The move is part of the rural development ministry's proposed revamp of MGNREGA, with focus on building capacity at the state, district and panchayat levels, besides augmenting implementing and monitoring prowess.

The revamp over the next two years will cover 200 most backward districts, with a special focus on the 72 districts identified by the home ministry and the Planning Commission under the integrated action plan (IAP) launched last year to tackle Maoism.

"The funds will be directed at having a panchayat development officer, a junior engineer or a technical kind of person and strengthening the banking infrastructure to address delayed payment of wages," the minister said.

Under MGNREGA, the Centre funds 100% of the wages for unskilled work, 75% of the material cost and unemployment allowance to be given to beneficiaries in case work is not provided under the programme.

**Additional
Central help
under NREGA
will be
available for
10 years in
the rest of the
districts, the
Centre will
continue to
provide 6%
financial aid**

The programme has floundered in the backward districts, especially those affected by Maoism, because of a near-absence of infrastructure required at the panchayat level to implement the programme.

In many cases, the panchayats are unable to implement the programme properly because of poor planning of works, delays in disbursement of wages and acute shortage of personnel to monitor works and to track demand.

As a result, the underdeveloped Maoist-affected districts, populated mostly by tribals and backward classes, have fared much worse than the rest of the country. In 2010-11, the average person-days generated under the scheme in 60 Maoist-affected districts was 29.85 crore, against the national average of 257.15 crore.

"We had sought support for administrative reforms in our districts as we have a lot of problems that prevent us from planning adequate works," district collector of a Maoist-affected district in Chhattisgarh said.

The ministry devised its response on the basis of such feedback. "At the implementation level, we should start off the reforms in those areas which are in dire need of labour mobilisation. And IAP districts are good enough to start with," Ramesh said.

Under the proposed revamp, engineers and hydrologists will assist the gram panchayats in planning and monitoring works under the programme. It has already paved the way for implementing the bank correspondent model in all states to make up for the low penetration of banks in rural areas. Agents are used on a commission basis under this model to provide banking services at the doorsteps of MGNREGA beneficiaries.

Other proposals in the charter of reforms include expansion of the programme to cover irrigation, horticulture and land development facilities. The revamp will also lead to convergence of MGNREGA with the total sanitation campaign and notification of MGNREGA audit with the CAG to "institutionalise effective social audit", among other reforms.