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Park wall status not clear, squatters to be back in focus

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Mumbai: The slums inside Sanjay Gandhi National Park are soon going to be back in focus when the Bombay HC hears a fresh plea by environmentalists, seeking compliance by state and forest authorities of a 2003 court direction to evict all encroachers.

The Bombay Environmental Action Group (BEAG) has filed an application to ensure that the state forest department and the conservator of the park complete constructing a wall around it as ordered by the high court first in 1998 and then again in September 2003. The wall is nowhere near completion and the problem of encroachers is threatening to erupt again, feel activists.

The environmentalists' group wants the state to provide an update on the progress in the construction of the wall and ensure demolition of all illegal structures. The voluntary group, which has filed a PIL since 1995 on removing encroachers from forest land, also wants the high court to restrain the state from transferring P N Munde, the forest conservator, without prior permission from the court till the 2003 order is complied with.

Debi Goenka, a member of the group, in his affidavit, has said of the 92-km stretch of the proposed walling, only 22 km had been completed till September 2003 and the current status was

unknown. The forest department, in March 2007, informed the court that of 61,000 unauthorised structures in the park, 49,000 had been removed. The remaining 11,658 were eligible for a rehabilitation plan as per a scheme formulated for their relocation provided the squatters paid Rs 7,000 per family.

However, the authorities estimate that around 17,000 illegal encroachers are still inside.

Around 3,500 tenements at Chandivli have been handed over

PLEA BEFORE HC

for the rehabilitation of forest slum-dwellers, but a large number of illegal structures are yet to be pulled down.

Former mayor Nirmala Sawant Prabhavalkar has also filed a plea seeking rehabilitation of 21,000-odd slum dwellers who wished to join the same scheme. Munde, in his reply, has said only 11,658 families have been found eligible with the cut-off being January 1, 1995. He added that their relocation process was on at Chandivli.

Munde, however, said if the court permits then the government is willing to accommodate the remaining encroachers who may be given time to pay Rs 7,000. "They may not be given tenements at Chandivli, but can be sent to other locations", he said.

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