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Activists reject land, rehab laws

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On February 11, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development had issued advertisements inviting comments on the Land Acquisition Amendment Bill and the Rehabilitation and Resettlement Bill by February 22.

The deadline for comments was very short. Activists were justifiably worried and suspicious. The committee looked like it was in a tearing hurry.

The two bills are enormously significant. For years, people's movements and NGOs have fought for a new law that would replace the archaic Land Acquisition Act of 1894, and give justice to people displaced by development projects.

Within the short time provided, the National Alliance for People's Movements (NAPM) carefully studied the two bills. NAPM is led by veteran activist Medha Patkar who heads the Narmada Bachao Andolan, (NBA), the longest ongoing agitation against displacement caused by big dams.

Other NGOs, too, dissected the bills. Twenty-six groups from the north-east held a consultation under the banner of the Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR) at Guwahati. Several infrastructure projects are coming up in their region. Some are welcome, but people are worried about the price they will have to pay since land and environment will be lost.

The NGOs and people's movements have now pronounced their verdict. They rejected the two new bills in their present form. The Land Acquisition Amendment Bill has come under special fire. It has been denounced as 'anti-people'. NAPM would like to see it scrapped completely.

People's movements and NGOs have many objections to the two bills.

In the Land Acquisition Amendment Bill, the concept of 'eminent domain' and 'public purpose' are not clearly spelt out, says NAPM. While under the amended version the government continues to have the right to acquire land for 'public purpose'



Medha Patkar

