

## Land row: Kashmir government takes pilgrimage management responsibility

In an attempt to defuse the highly surcharged atmosphere triggered by the controversial forest land transfer, Kashmir Governor N.N. Vohra Sunday asked the state government if it can ensure the management of annual Hindu pilgrimage to the Amarnath cave shrine.

Vohra, in his capacity as the chairman of the Shri Amarnath Shrine Board (SASB), asked Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad 'whether the state administration was ready to provide logistic support, safety, security and other arrangements for the smooth conduct of the Amarnath pilgrimage', highly placed sources told IANS.

The move comes a day after the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) pulled out of the Congress-led coalition government amid differences over the allotment of forest land to the SASB.

The governor's letter, however, made no mention of the contentious land allotment but after the state government takes over the management and conduct of the pilgrimage, the SASB would have no role in it.

The Kashmir Valley has witnessed violent protests in the past week, after the state government March 5 allotted 40 hectares of forest land to the SASB that manages the annual pilgrimage to the Himalayan cave shrine in south Kashmir. The shrine houses a 'lingam' or a stalagmite structure, which is seen as an icon of Lord Shiva, one of the Hindu trinity.

Muslims in the Kashmir Valley are opposed to the allotment alleging the board would use the land to settle 'outsiders' in the area and thus change the region's demography.

Sources said Azad had replied to Vohra's query confirming that the state government was 'ready to take full responsibility for security and management of pilgrims'.

The chief minister in his letter said the Amarnath pilgrimage had always been a symbol of Hindu-Muslim amity and all attempts to communalise the issue needed to be defeated at every cost.

It is believed that the SASB after receiving the chief minister's assurance would de-requisition the disputed forest land whose ownership would automatically revert back to the state government once the SASB relinquished the role of pilgrimage management.

What needs to be closely monitored now is whether or not the unprecedented public frenzy triggered by the land row settles down after the exchange of letters between the SASB and the state government.

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