

Kashmir government to retain forest land: Azad

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad Sunday said the state will retain the forest land allotted to the Shri Amarnath Shrine Board (SASB). But he maintained that there was no question of dissolving the shrine board.

Addressing the media here, Azad said: "The government has taken up the responsibility of managing the Amarnath yatra (pilgrimage) that includes providing security and facilities to the pilgrims.'

Asked whether the state government was now contemplating rescinding the land allotment order to the SASB, Azad said: "Since the SASB has reverted the responsibilities of conducting the pilgrimage to the state government, the issue of forest land allotment to SASB has already been settled as the shrine board no longer needs this land.'

But he quickly added: 'There is no question of dissolving the SASB since all the religious functions in connection with the Yatra would be carried by them.'

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 Hindu cave shrine in south Kashmir.

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. The issue triggered an unrelenting controversy and four people were killed and scores injured in clashes between the police and the agitated Muslim protesters.

Earlier Sunday, in an attempt to defuse the highly surcharged atmosphere triggered by the controversial forest land transfer, Governor N.N. Vohra asked the state government to take charge of managing the pilgrimage. Azad then replied to Vohra's query confirming that the state government was 'ready to take full responsibility for security and management of pilgrims'.

'The government will make all temporary facilities on the forest land for the convenience of the pilgrims,' Azad said in the news conference.

The move came a day after the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) left the government in crisis by pulling out of the Congress-led coalition amid differences over the allotment of forest land to the SASB.

Azad also requested the people to call off the protests since the issue of forest land allotment was settled.

He also said vested interests both in the Kashmir Valley and the Jammu region were trying to derive political mileage out of this issue by stoking communal passions.

'We must defeat such communal forces,' he said.

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