

## Chandigarh's top brass fight over multi-million rupee land deals

Touted as the greenest and most liveable city in India, Chandigarh is these days witnessing a major confrontation in its government as the union territory's administrator and top bureaucrat trade charges over land deals.

There are sharp differences between Chandigarh's Administrator S.F. Rodrigues, who is also the governor of Punjab, and Pradip Mehra, the seniormost bureaucrat of the city and adviser to the administrator, over prime real estate acquired for ambitious projects. These land deals run into billions of rupees.

Rodrigues, a former army chief, is at loggerheads with others too. He does not have a good equation with Chandigarh's Lok Sabha member and union Minister of State for Finance Pawan Kumar Bansal either.

Senior city Congress leaders, including Chandigarh's Mayor Pradeep Chhabbra, Thursday demanded that Rodrigues should proceed on leave as union territory administrator pending a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe into land deals in the city.

'It is in the interest of the city that the administrator steps down for a fair and impartial probe into the land deals. The administrator's post is not constitutional. The post itself should be abolished by the centre,' former mayor and senior Congress leader Subhash Chawla told IANS.

Mehra has objected to several of the projects pushed forward, sometimes at unusual speed, by the administration under Rodrigues.

In one particular case of setting up of a multi-million Film-City project here, which was allotted to realty developer Parsvnath, he has even gone to the extent of seeking a CBI probe.

The developer, who had deposited over Rs.470 million for the project, has sought his money back and is unwilling to take up the nearly Rs.2- billion project given the current negative trends in the real estate market and the failure of the administration to hand over land free from all encumbrances.

Rodrigues, in an interview to a leading daily here Thursday, claimed that if any charge was proved against him, he would leave immediately.

'The home ministry knows the actual position about each and every project... It has no objection to any of my projects. I do what has to be done as per law. Let the public and home ministry decide. I will immediately put in my papers if a single charge of corruption or impropriety is proved against me or my family,' he said.

Mehra had recently even objected to the Medi-City project being offered for just over Rs.2.2 billion, saying that the land was worth Rs.20 billion.

The vibes between Rodrigues and Mehra have hit such a low that they have not met one-on-one for nearly nine months.

Rodrigues recently ordered a Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) probe against Mehra following

anonymous allegations that he got his government house in [New Delhi](#) renovated through officials and contractors of the Chandigarh Industrial and Tourism Development Organization (CITCO).

This was despite CVC guidelines that no anonymous complaints be entertained. Subsequently, Rodrigues divested Mehra of the powers to write the annual confidential reports (ACRs) of senior officers. This move is being keenly debated, as bureaucrats wonder whether rules permit the withdrawal of this power.

In another case, Rodrigues assigned the probe against Mehra about a controversy over implementation of value added tax (VAT) in the union territory to Chandigarh's finance secretary Sanjay Kumar, who is Mehra's junior in rank.

Sources in the Chandigarh administration say that most land deals done by the administration with leading private developers during Rodrigues' tenure have run into controversies. The market value of land in these projects is estimated at over Rs.200 billion.

The allotment of an amusement and theme park to realty developer Unitech has also raised controversy for the unusual haste in moving the project from its concept stage to allotment - done in a matter of a few weeks. However, nearly two years after the project was allotted, the park is yet to come up.

This is the first time the city's administration has seen such a clash between topmost officials ever since Chandigarh was developed as a symbol of a new, resurgent, independent India in the early 1950s.

'Officers are getting divided into two camps because of the two top men. In the long run, this is not good for the city's development. This should stop now,' a senior official told IANS on condition of anonymity.

The post of administrator was created by the central government in the late 1980s to facilitate the Punjab governor. Chandigarh, the joint capital of Punjab and Haryana, is a centrally-administered union territory. While the governor's post is largely ceremonial, the administrator's post gives the incumbent a lot of power here.

Until then, the city's head used to be the chief commissioner. But when the administrator's post was created, this official was designated adviser to the administrator.

*Jaideep Sarin* ( © IANS / India eNews)